The Social Security Administration's Expansion of Health Information Technology to Obtain and Analyze Medical Records for Disability Claims
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Objective

To assess the Social Security Administration's (SSA) efforts to expand the use of health information technology (health IT) to obtain and analyze medical records for disability claims.

Background

To make disability determinations, SSA (a) manually requests medical records and receives them in paper format (mail or fax) or through Electronic Records Express (ERE), which is SSA's secure web portal, or (b) requests and receives them *automatically* from health IT.

Health IT is a broad concept that uses an array of technologies, such as electronic health records and exchange networks, to record, store, protect, retrieve, send, and receive medical records securely over the Internet.

It can take SSA days, week, or months to obtain paper records. SSA does not track the time from when it requests and receives ERE records; whereas health IT records arrive in seconds or minutes.

SSA uses its Medical Evidence Gathering and Analysis through Health Information Technology (MEGAHIT) software to automatically request and receive health IT records and perform data analysis.

Conclusion

Despite spending more than 10 years trying to increase the number of medical records received through health IT, SSA still receives most records in paper or ERE format. In the Fiscal Year (FY) that ended on September 30, 2020, SSA received only 11 percent of medical records through health IT.

SSA experienced a decreasing trend in adding new health IT partners from 56 in FY 2018 to 12 in FY 2021 (as of August). During this time, SSA reduced the number of staff and contractors involved in health IT outreach and did not fully fund projects to increase electronic medical evidence. Also, expanding the number of health IT records by adding new partners is not a unilateral decision made by SSA, as prospective partners must be willing and able to meet SSA's technical requirements, and COVID-19 was a factor. In October 2021, SSA informed us it was (a) working on *Memorandums of Understanding* with 3 entities to exchange health IT records with over 30 large health IT organizations and (b) adding more staff to develop and implement strategies to expand health IT.

Challenges in expanding the number of health IT records include some partners' inability to send sensitive medical records, acceptance of SSA's authorization form to release records to the Agency (Form SSA-827), and medical industry-wide differences in patient-identifying data fields.

Additionally, SSA has had limited success analyzing medical records because MEGAHIT is limited to analyzing only structured data. MEGAHIT generated data extracts on only 7.3 percent of the 1.6 million health IT records SSA received in FY 2020. The extracts assist SSA disability examiners in making accurate disability determinations. Since 2018, SSA has been developing and testing the Intelligent Medical-Language Analysis GENeration application with new capabilities for reviewing medical records. As of August 2021, SSA was still testing and rolling out this application to its offices.

Recommendation

We recommend SSA intensify efforts to increase the number of health IT partners. SSA agreed with the recommendation.