



Evolving 'equity' push by CMS signals a new front for providers

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Compliance

A flurry of new proposals from HHS and CMS centered around "health equity" suggests that federal agencies may soon require providers to perform equity-related tasks, and experts believe data collection is likely to be the first attainable goal.

On April 20, CMS released a strategic action plan, a broad but still developing guide, in which equity would be the "first pillar." Through the action plan, the agency seeks to "close the gaps in health care access, quality and outcomes for underserved populations" and "ensure engagement with and accountability to the communities CMS serves in policy development and the implementation of CMS programs." The plan also calls for the "collection of social needs data" and seeks to "promote broader access to health-related social needs."

While specific details about the action plan remain scant, other recent policy announcements are leading experts to believe that providers may soon have a more direct role in the equity strategy, and it could take the form of reporting requirements, at least for starters.

Age of equity

The term "health equity" has been in use at CMS for years. Since 2018, for example, the Office of Minority Health (OMH) has given awards to organizations that have "demonstrated a strong commitment to health equity." But over the past year, references to health equity have begun cropping up more frequently in regulation, guidance and other CMS documents, including the most recent physician fee schedule rules ([PBN 8/2/21](#)). In February, CMS changed its Direct Contracting program into the ACO REACH program, which is set to include an unprecedented equity benchmark ([PBN 3/21/22](#)).

This isn't the agency's only recent equity-related outreach, either:

- The OMH released a "Framework for Health Equity 2022-2032" in April 2022, urging CMS to "build capacity among providers, plans and other organizations to enable stakeholders to meet the needs of the communities they serve."
- On Feb. 2, CMS' Medicare Advantage and Part D Advance Notice requested "input on a potential change to the MA and Part D Star Ratings that would take into account how well each plan advances health equity."
- CMS' hospital inpatient prospective payment system (IPPS) and long-term care hospital prospective payment system (LTCH PPS) proposed rule for 2023 includes three new "equity-focused measures" for hospital inpatient quality reporting, including some that "capture screening and identification of patient-level, health-related social needs — such as food insecurity, housing instability, transportation needs, utility difficulties and interpersonal safety."

"So far, CMS has outlined the strategic priorities for addressing health equity in broad brush strokes," says Theresa Hush, CEO of Roji Health Intelligence, a consultancy and data registry in Chicago. In some of these moves "the agency has expressed slightly more detail and references to 'measures' of equity," though these are yet to be defined.

ACOs in front

One area where equity is making inroads is in value-based and accountable care, and not just in the ACO REACH model. Many integrated health care organizations are providing services with social components, and the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMMI) gives awards to interdisciplinary organizations that include social work, behavioral health and other kinds of care. In 2021, for example, CMMI granted \$2 million to the Children's Home Society of Florida for outreach that would include "health, social, behavioral health, parental support and after-school activities."

Lauren Patrick, president and CEO of qualified registry Healthmonix in Malvern, Pa., attended the National Association of Accountable Care Organizations (NAACOS) conference in Baltimore in April and found many ACOs were showing a "focus on health equity that has already begun from an action standpoint."

Among the methods Patrick noted, besides the emphasis on social work and behavioral health support, were "clinics located in more accessible locations, such as [a] strip mall" and "home-based support, with consideration of the digital divide [in telemedicine]." Patrick also saw a "focus on life expectancy data to drive patient targeting," which aligns with a consideration of non-medical data that affects longevity, such as poverty and environmental factors.

Equity in QPP, data collection

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As the strategic plan eventually filters into rulemaking this year, Patrick anticipates "that when the proposed rule for fee-for-service is published, there will also be mention of proposed changes to the Quality Payment Program [QPP] to begin to incorporate the focus on health equity," probably in measures QPP participants will report.

(Note: The 2022 MIPS Improvement Activities include a Promoting Health Equity subcategory, but with measures such as "Promote Use of Patient-Reported Outcome Tools" and "Comprehensive Eye Exams," the focus is only glancingly related to the broader equity movement.)

Data collection will likely be an early equity touchpoint for providers as CMS works to quantify the equity shortfalls that providers will have to correct. "CMMI is deep in the mix of facilitating the collection and analysis of equity data," Patrick says. "This data is to be overlaid across models to evaluate the inclusion and impact of diverse and underserved populations. The ACO REACH model is the first model to embed equity data; however, it seems to be intended to exemplify the commitment moving forward."

Hush expects to see "the first specific measures coming out of data — or the lack of data — by 2023, and that during 2024 there will be a full fleshed-out set of measures, outcomes and rewards or consequences for organizations." She expects that providers won't be required to report SDOH data, but CMS will "track use of Z-codes and other data sets to examine the collection and use of that data."

This could be a further stimulus to long-promised new tech standards for health care, particularly in terms of interoperability (PBN 1/18/21). Rafal Walkiewicz, founder of insurance navigator Hella Health in New York City, believes this level of data collection will require it. "They need standardized frameworks to provide data and then the means to provide it," Walkiewicz says. "Tech can help capture and organize the data needed while protecting the privacy of patients."

Amanda Simmons, executive vice president at Integrated Health Partners, a subsidiary of Health Care Partners of California (HCP) of Southern California in San Diego, agrees. "The data gap in equity/social determinants is wide and will need to be addressed before initiatives take place," she says. "EHRs are not built to accommodate SDOH datasets and usage; therefore, vendors will need to be engaged as well. Additional data tools for SDOH datasets are emerging, such as Unite Us and Aunt Bertha, but there is no funding for such investments."

Peter Manoogian, principal with ZS health care consultancy in Boston, would like to see "more hard objectives or quantifiable goals due to meet by certain dates" to stir provider involvement.

"There are very tangible [solutions] a system could implement to address equity," Manoogian says. "For example, average wait time for a non-English-speaking patient to get a support person at the provider, with a mandate to get from X to Y to serve a multilingual population — some of the obvious, doable changes within an existing workflow that break down some of obvious care barriers."

Resources

"CMS Outlines Strategy to Advance Health Equity, Challenges Industry Leaders to Address Systemic Inequities," April 20, 2022: www.cms.gov/newsroom/press-releases/cms-outlines-strategy-advance-health-equity-challenges-industry-leaders-address-systemic-inequities

CMMI, "Health Care Innovation Awards Round Two: Project Profile, Children's Home Society of Florida," May 4, 2021: <https://innovation.cms.gov/innovation-models/participant/health-care-innovation-awards-round-two/childrens-home-society-of-florida>

CMS Office of Minority Health, "Framework for Health Equity 2022-2032": www.cms.gov/files/document/cms-framework-health-equity.pdf



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