

Healthcare IT News

Healthcare IT News

Federal privacy panel leader resigns, raps standards

By [Diana Manos, Senior Editor](mailto:diana.manos@medtechpublishing.com) | 02/22/07

WASHINGTON – The leader of a federal panel charged with providing privacy recommendations for the national health information network resigned Wednesday, thwarted, he said, in efforts to develop adequate standards.

The resignation comes amid complaints from others about the speed with which standards are being written.

Paul Feldman, deputy director of the nonprofit Health Privacy Project, stepped down from his position as co-chair of the American Health Information Community's Confidentiality, Privacy, and Security Workgroup, created in May 2006.

In a letter sent Wednesday to 15 members of Congress, Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt and HHS Interim National Coordinator for Health Information Technology Robert Kolodner, Feldman said the workgroup's efforts to establish standards for the nation's developing healthcare IT network, are "a far cry from a comprehensive and timely approach that would give privacy policy equal and necessary footing with interoperability and systems development efforts."

Janlori Goldman, director of the Health Privacy Project, also signed the letter.

"We already know that the majority of people in this country fear that their health information is more prone to misuse in electronic form," Feldman said. "We must not shirk our duty to protect them from such harm."

AHIC must provide recommendations for healthcare IT standards that will be required by federal contractors as early as Jan. 2008 – and eventually will be adopted nationwide – according to John Halamka, chairman of the Health Information Technology Standards Panel, also known as HITSP.

HITSP will develop the standards based on AHIC recommendations, Halamka said at a Feb. 21 AHIC meeting.

HHS criticized for moving too fast

Feldman is not the first to express dissatisfaction with standards setting.

Long before HHS Secretary Leavitt approved interoperability standards in December, stakeholders had been raising complaints about the unreasonable speed that standards are being adopted through the AHIC-HITSP process.

Gary Dickinson, director of healthcare standards for CentriflyHealth and a panel member on several HITSP committees has submitted more than four public complaints to HITSP and one set of comments to AHIC within the last year.

Dickinson said he is concerned that the foundation for privacy is missing in the current standards process, posing a threat to consumers. "Real world scenarios are not being taken into account," Dickinson said. "Instead of going through a full analysis process, [HHS] has only cared about the back end of systems and interoperability standards."

Dickinson said this raises privacy concerns because information cannot be exchanged at the back end unless its origination is known through proper authentication on the front end, "to ensure that information being exchanged is trusted."

In response to Dickinson's complaints, Halamka told Healthcare IT News in a Dec. 18 interview that his role is to make sure every voice in HITSP gets equally heard. "Privacy issues are foundational," Halamka said. "My sense is we have a pretty open and transparent process."

Halamka said Feb. 21 that the interoperability standards are still subject to small changes over the next year. "HITSP tried really hard to get it right, but we still need to be vetted by the industry and reality-checked," Halamka said.