

**STATEMENT OF MR. WILLIAM J. TINSTON
DIRECTOR OF FEDERAL ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORD MODERNIZATION PROGRAM
OFFICE BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION**

SEPTEMBER 30, 2020

Madam Chair Lee, Ranking Member Banks and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) electronic health record (EHR) modernization.

On behalf of the Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization (FEHRM) program office, I appreciate your support and commitment to a modernized EHR. The federal EHR is large in scale and complexity, and the FEHRM is dedicated to getting deployment, implementation, and interoperability right. I am confident we will improve health care delivery to our nation's Service members and Veterans while ensuring fiscal responsibility of taxpayer dollars.

Today, I will provide an update on the FEHRM, our progress toward enhancing our beneficiaries' health care experience and our continuing effort to drive capabilities that support the delivery of patient-centered health care..

FEHRM Organizational Update

On December 4, 2019, the DOD and VA chartered the FEHRM. This charter established the FEHRM's primary mission to implement a single, common EHR to enhance patient care and provider effectiveness, regardless of the location of care.

The FEHRM serves as a single point of accountability in the delivery of a common record that contributes to full interoperability of health care information between the departments. The FEHRM Director and Deputy Director report to the VA Deputy Secretary and the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Defense.

This new organizational structure significantly shifted work from broad interoperability and standards work to management of critical initiatives to implement the joint system/common record. To support the implementation of a single, common EHR, the FEHRM established an agile operating model that identifies joint risks, issues and opportunities while driving stakeholders toward joint solutions.

Today, the FEHRM is an active partner to the DOD, VA and United States Coast Guard (USCG) EHR modernization programs. The FEHRM furthers this partnership's objectives by actively managing risks and the operation of the joint Federal Enclave; minimizing risks to EHR deployment and implementation; identifying opportunities for efficiency, standardization, and system and process optimization; and advancing interoperability

across both the federal and private sectors. This allows DOD, VA and USCG to focus on deploying the EHR to improve health care for our beneficiaries.

A Single, Common EHR Enhances Care

Patient-centered care is not only our ethos, it is the core of our design. An EHR system securely documents, stores, retrieves, shares and analyzes information about the patient, not where care is given. It enables a longitudinal version of a patient's health record, which starts when they enter Military Service and continues throughout Veteran status.

Through the FEHRM's contributions and solutions, the DOD, VA and USCG will deploy a single, common record. A single, common EHR will enhance the delivery of health care services, improving care quality, patient safety and patient outcomes. The FEHRM helps drive the capabilities of the EHR system to make it safer, more efficient, and more effective.

Driving EHR Modernization Capabilities/Adding Value

The FEHRM drives capabilities to enhance health care by leading value-added activities for DOD, VA and USCG EHR deployments. These activities include managing common capabilities including the EHR baseline; the federal enclave; software releases and upgrades; and cybersecurity.

To that end, we operationalize the FEHRM by identifying joint site opportunities, initiating the Enterprise Operations Center (EOC), improving interoperability and managing the joint health information exchange (HIE). By providing these capabilities, the FEHRM enables the Departments to focus on deploying the single, common EHR that creates a seamless care experience for all. The FEHRM works at an unmatched scale and complexity in this endeavor. In addition to its work with the DOD, VA, USCG and external providers, the FEHRM works with federal partners and numerous governance bodies to support more than 27 million worldwide beneficiaries and more than 470 thousand providers.

The FEHRM leads the analysis and integration of deployment activities at joint DOD/VA sharing sites. This responsibility often presents unique problems requiring innovative solutions. For example, sites where resources are shared between DOD and VA require a concerted deconfliction effort; however, they also present opportunities for efficiencies. In situations such as this, the FEHRM fosters careful collaboration, facilitates joint decision-making and contributes to a thorough understanding of the possible effects of the EHR.

The FEHRM accomplishes this difficult, complex task by working closely with site leadership on technical, functional and programmatic issues, including implementation schedules, joint access and network security. The FEHRM's activities are informed by decades of Department partnering. DOD and VA each have more than 30 years of health care resource sharing experience, resulting in a history of numerous sharing agreements and multiple joint ventures that help inform the implementation of a single, common EHR at sharing sites.

The FEHRM plays an integral role in department “Go-Lives”, as its provision of common capabilities improves the effectiveness of EHR deployment. We troubleshoot issues and mitigate risks; identify opportunities for efficiencies; and provide the common capabilities and software solutions to enable an effective EHR implementation for the DOD, VA and USCG. The FEHRM aligns unique competencies against complex problems.

The FEHRM’s contributions to the DOD’s EHR deployment initiative plays a key role in the Department meeting its scheduled 2023 implementation objectives. The DOD has already successfully delivered the EHR to eight DOD sites, and is currently delivering to 10 new sites. Additional DOD “Go-Live” site deployments are scheduled for November 2020. Further, we were an active partner in the USCG’s recent delivery of the EHR to four new pilot sites on August 29, 2020.

We learn from each and every EHR deployment, and apply our experience to further improve our IT efforts. Great examples of these improvements can be found in our processes, communications and training.

We learned how to deliver a better record and provide the IT to get the health care workflows right. In addition, we improved our communications with users, and are more effective at developing a shared understanding of outcomes with users. Effective communications improved our training processes. We listened to users, adjusted and improved the delivery of EHR training. As a result, new iterations of provider training feature more instructor-led training. The FEHRM looks forward to bringing this EHR experience and user focus to the upcoming VA EHR roll-out at Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center.

As VA prepares to go-live in the Pacific Northwest, we work with them and our vendors to configure our single, common record to meet the needs of all clinicians and patients, wherever they receive care. Specifically, we work with the VA to assess areas for joint decisions and increased program efficiencies. One specific example is our participation in VA’s clinical workshops, which resulted in opportunities to improve the DOD-deployed clinical workflows. Through this partnership, we will jointly deliver a secure, modern EHR that will follow our Service members from their first day in DOD through Veteran status, easing transitions from DOD to VA care.

The FEHRM recently supported the VA’s implementation of the Centralized Scheduling Solution (CSS) in Columbus, Ohio on August 21, 2020. During VA’s deployment of this new capability, 100% of patients and booked appointments were transferred into the new system, with no system issues that threatened the project and no urgent system issues that negatively impacted Veteran care.

A key element of our strategy to successfully facilitate the implementation of a single, common EHR is the Enterprise Operations Center (EOC). Initiating the EOC allows the FEHRM to more effectively monitor and integrate incident management and resolution processes. Essentially, the FEHRM EOC will function as the EHR’s air traffic controller. Through this capability, we can monitor all EHR activities, understand impacts, identify opportunities for efficiencies and prioritize changes across the Departments. The EOC also

supports communications between sites and senior leaders and focuses on incident management response and resolution.

Every day the FEHRM delivers capabilities to VA, DOD, USCG and private sector partner clinicians so they can seamlessly deliver the best care for their patients. Further, the FEHRM works closely with the Office of National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) and national standards organizations to improve the continuity of care among and between public- and private-sector providers.

To enable the DOD, VA and USCG to better deploy a single, common EHR system, the FEHRM developed an Interoperability Modernization Strategy, guided by DOD and VA senior leaders and stakeholders. This strategy:

- Provides a framework to deliver interoperable solutions to benefit beneficiaries.
- Adopts the goals from the ONC 2020–2025 Federal Health IT Strategic Plan to align with national health IT priorities.
- Defines objectives in support of the strategic goals and address the NDAA for fiscal year 2020 requirements.

A leading example of how the FEHRM operationalized its strategy is through the launch of the joint HIE in April 2020. This capability proved a critical step forward in the journey toward EHR modernization and interoperability, representing the very first instance of a joint deployment of DOD and VA capabilities. This initiative provides DOD, VA, USCG and hundreds of private sector partners the ability to immediately exchange and use data between them. This expansive HIE network represents more than 2,000 hospitals, 8,800 pharmacies, 33,000 clinics, 800 federally-qualified health centers and 300 nursing homes.

The joint HIE enhances the ability of DOD, VA, USCG and private sector partner providers to quickly and securely access patient electronic health information and make more informed treatment decisions. As an example, this initiative provided the VA the new capability to greatly improve retrieval time by “pre-fetching” data the day prior to an appointment. Within the joint HIE ecosystem, participating private sector providers access a single point of entry to request and access DOD, VA and USCG patient information to support the continuity of care for Service members, Veterans and their families. Further, the joint HIE reduces the partner burden for agreements, as they need to only sign a single, comprehensive trust agreement.

The value of the joint HIE is not limited to clinicians. Partnered with an EHR solution, the joint HIE’s data sharing capabilities enhance the health care experience for beneficiaries as well. This digital sharing of data minimizes the number of times patients need to share their health histories, undergo duplicative tests or manage printed health records.

The joint HIE is a key element of the FEHRM’s support of a continuously improving health care experience. The joint HIE provides a platform for future interoperability expansion. A leading example of the FEHRM’s dedicated effort to expand interoperability is

the upcoming connection to the CommonWell Health Alliance, a network of more than 15,000 community providers in all 50 states, D.C. and Puerto Rico. This connection is targeted for October 2020.

The FEHRM'S continued efforts to improve the joint HIE is transforming health care delivery for Service members, Veterans and their families. With experts in analytics, clinical care, information technology and training, the FEHRM drives federal solutions for a better and more efficient health care experience.

EHR Deployment and COVID-19 Response

Despite the operational impacts of COVID-19, the FEHRM remains focused on driving capabilities to implement a single, common EHR. In fact, COVID-19 demonstrated the new ability to quickly adapt to the changing demands on the system and support providers during the pandemic. As we witnessed, there is a steep learning curve with new diseases like COVID-19, and the real-time propagation of this knowledge among federal and community care providers is critical to meet this challenge and prepare for the next one.

While on-site EHR deployment activities were suspended temporarily to clear the way for COVID-19 pandemic response, the FEHRM focused on activities to advance technical solutions, capability delivery and joint initiatives without on-site engagement. For example, right in the middle of the pandemic, the FEHRM went live with the joint HIE capability. Now, there is a single front door for exchange between DOD, VA, USCG and the private sector.

In response to COVID-19, the FEHRM focuses on what EHR implementation looks like within the new normal of health care delivery and how IT capabilities can support this new normal. For example, COVID-19 demonstrated the beneficiary need for virtual health care delivery. In response, the FEHRM accelerated the adoption of IT tools, platforms and capabilities to make virtual health more effective. The FEHRM also explored joint opportunities to deliver telemedicine via connected virtual care capabilities.

Conclusion

In closing, as a son and brother of Veterans, I am focused on delivering patient-centered care, providing the greatest capabilities available to support the most informed clinical decision making. The success of EHR deployment is fulfilling a solemn promise to our Service members, Veterans and their families.

The FEHRM is dedicated to providing health care providers with IT they do not need to think about by seamlessly providing them the right data about the right patient at the right time. Focusing on continuous capability delivery not only improves the delivery of health care by our partnered clinicians, it improves the health care experience for our valued beneficiaries. I look forward to our continued partnership, transparent communications and commitment to provide our nation's Veterans the care they deserve and informing you of our progress as we continue this vital mission.