

Behind the Transformation Efforts

Changing the federal health landscape

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The COVID-19 public health emergency brought into focus the limits and possibilities of federal health IT.

As treatment and vaccine distribution accelerate and the nation considers a return to “normal,” IT will be key to economic recovery and protecting Americans’ health.

To meet emerging challenges, federal agencies can look to **NIH’s Information Technology Acquisition and Assessment Center (NITAAC) Chief Information Officer-Solutions and Partners 4 (CIO-SP4)** governmentwide contract as one of the largest and most transformative federal health IT contracts in recent history.

TECHNOLOGY CAN REDUCE PROVIDER BURDEN

For some time, the healthcare industry has been turning to technology in an effort to improve care and lighten the load on staff. But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, the need for IT transformation became more urgent than ever. Overcrowded hospitals, overworked staff and targeted security threats surged as the pandemic escalated. In response, healthcare leaders turned to emerging technologies to reduce administrative burden and keep the focus on patient care.

Federal health IT contractors, such as National Government Services, helped address some of these challenges.

“This time last year, as the nation began to shut down due to the pandemic, we remained fully operational,” said Krista Yager, Chief Digital Officer for National Government Services. “We provided mission-essential functions for the providers working with Medicare beneficiaries, as well as preserved access to information for the beneficiaries themselves.”

Yager, who leads the execution of National Government Services’ digital health contracts, is excited about the value IT transformation brings, a fact highlighted during the global health crisis. She and her team mobilized a command center to ensure continuity of services for beneficiaries and providers during the pandemic response.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a microscopic view into how IT can transform federal health, but its relevance extends beyond the current crisis. Over the last decade, the United States has witnessed seismic changes to its healthcare system. These include the historic passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010, the shift from a fee-for-service model to a quality-of-care approach, and increased adoption of digital health and precision medicine. Moreover, the Biden administration plans to introduce a number of health-related policy priorities, from expanding ACA to improving health equity across the country.



Yager’s team at National Government Services has spent decades partnering with health agencies to navigate every major turn, serving as a health IT integrator at the forefront of the national healthcare agenda. Today, the National Government Services team is focused on investing in agile, human-centered design and data to improve community health. And by building on previous and existing partnerships with key agencies like the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), National Government Services is eager to expand its footprint to meet the health challenges of today — and tomorrow.



AN EYE TOWARD COLLABORATION

One signature aspect of federal health IT, Yager says, is that it often requires collaboration among multiple contractors and across agencies.

“We’re operating not only within the agency, but across multiple agencies, to bring data together for higher quality of service. That includes agencies not related to healthcare but connected to the payment of healthcare, such as the IRS, who we have worked with to ensure timely payments,” she says.

It’s not only government agencies that must work together to drive successful healthcare outcomes; various tools and technologies must also interoperate to establish new approaches

or improve existing processes. The team at National Government Services leverages tools like Splunk and MuleSoft to support secure data integration. Interoperability among systems, Yager says, is key to advancing health IT services.

Using application programming interfaces (APIs), electronic data interchange (EDI) and Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources (FHIR) transactions also play a large role in integrating government IT tools and systems and allow for self-service transactions when administering care. National Government Services has worked directly with healthcare providers and customers to deploy these tools.

“We’re working with our customers to develop connections through many different, disparate systems using custom APIs. It gives us as a contractor the ability to access specific health data quickly and also offer real-time, self-service data to our provider community. It has not only saved money and increased the quality of payments, but medical professionals are seeing better response times in their ability to get to this data — and they can access it 24/7.”

Jane Hite-Syed

Chief Information Officer
National Government Services

A DIGITAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

“That’s the way it’s always been done” is a sentiment the National Government Services team vehemently rejects. The organization has embraced a model of conceptualization, assessment and deployment.

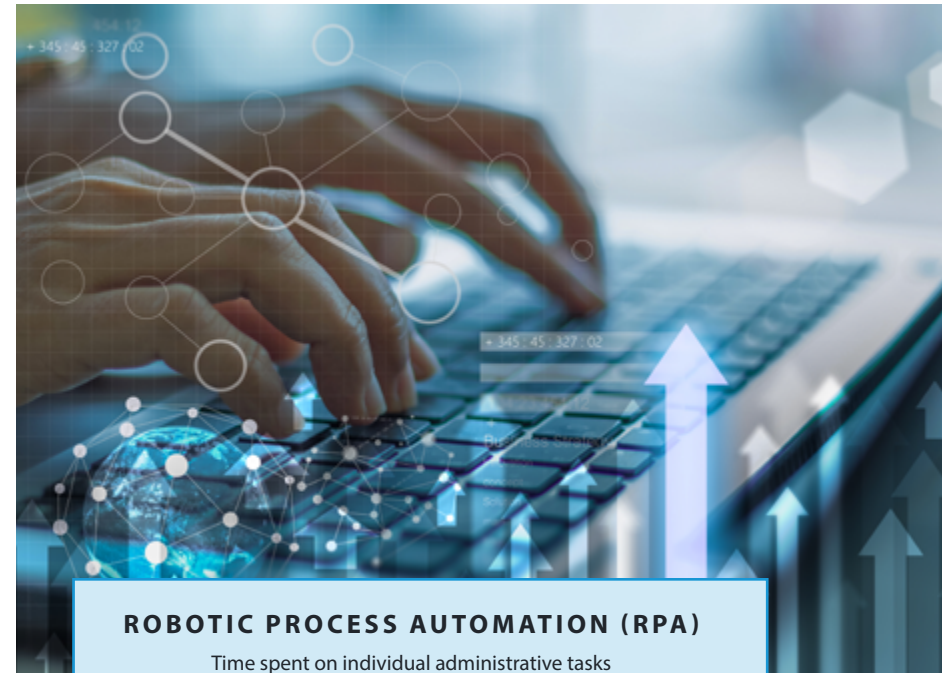
“As an organization, we’ve fully shifted to an agile methodology and human-centered design approach across all of our work. There’s been a cultural transformation in how we deliver, how we interact with our business partners and customers, and how we strive to put the human first,” says Hite-Syed.

The approach has paid off. National Government Services leveraged a low-code development platform to build software that would replace expensive legacy applications. A system that took over 13 years to develop was replaced in six months of effort by the National Government Services IT team. It also tapped robotic process automation (RPA) to streamline processes, reducing workloads that once spanned two and a half hours to just 20 minutes, Hite-Syed explained.

This is just the beginning of the transformational activities that National Government Services has up its sleeve. By merging agile, HCD and custom technology, the organization offers customers systems and tools designed for the human to achieve quality outcomes.

However, in a highly-regulated industry like healthcare, innovation can succeed only when the proper security measures are in place. National Government Services understands that, which is why the organization operates with a development, security and operations (DevSecOps) mindset. Everyone is responsible for integrating security throughout the solution’s design, deployment, use and management.

“Due to the sensitive nature of the work we are entrusted to perform, security is first and foremost,” says Hite-Syed. “We begin our work with security in mind. Our security team has a seat at the table for all solutions and is involved in the decisions we make. Anything that touches healthcare data, security has to be part of it.”



ROBOTIC PROCESS AUTOMATION (RPA)

Time spent on individual administrative tasks

BEFORE RPA

2.5
HOURS

AFTER RPA

20
MINUTES



ENABLING SEAMLESS USER EXPERIENCES

In a perfect world, accessing patient benefits or tracking a claim would be quick and straightforward. But these processes can often be burdensome. It's a trend that runs rampant across the healthcare industry — and one the team at National Government Services is working to change.

That's the goal of National Government Services' human-centered design practice area. The organization approaches new projects by holding Voice of the Customer (VOC) roundtables. This helps to identify user personas and maps their specific user journeys. For example, if a medical provider was trying to access a Medicare claims status or information on how to properly code and submit a procedure for payment, what would their experience look like? Could they successfully — and easily — find what they were looking for?

Based on this research, along with VOC roundtables with providers and other stakeholders, National Government Services discovered that one of the key pain points among providers and office administrators was that every time they called in to request information or ask a question, they had to re-enter their information multiple times. From the user's perspective, this was time-consuming and frustrating.

After hearing these concerns, National Government Services developed a solution that would require users to provide their information only once per day. They could call multiple times in the span of 24 hours without having to repeatedly enter the same data. As National Government Services continues to build new solutions, its developers and designers are working closely with customers and providers

alike to build open-source tools that align with the end-user.

This human-centered approach has benefited not only beneficiaries and providers, but also government contractors who work day in and day out to process these medical claims. As one of the top federal contractors supporting CMS' IT modernization, National Government Services developed a prototype for an integration layer that connects provider systems with Medicare claims processing systems. With over 1,500 highly trained federal healthcare experts, National Government Services builds and maintains mission-critical solutions that serve a large percentage of our nation's population.

A VEHICLE FOR ENHANCING HEALTH IT SOLUTIONS NATIONWIDE

The federal government has taken several steps to procure these critical health IT solutions quickly and efficiently at a time when the nation is most in need of quality care. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has seen a 32% increase in spending for FY 2020. This uptick, according to a Deltek report, can be attributed to the need for medical research and testing in the wake of COVID-19. Moreover, NIH's Information Technology Acquisition and Assessment Center (NITAAC) recently released an RFP for [Chief Information Officer-Solutions and Partners 4 \(CIO-SP4\)](#), a government-wide acquisition contract that serves as one of the main acquisition vehicles for IT products and services for federal agencies. This contract comes as the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) continues to prioritize IT modernization efforts. According to the [Office of Management and Budget](#), HHS (which includes CMS, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration, among others), spent \$6.6 billion on IT modernization efforts in FY 2020 and has budgeted \$6.4 billion for FY 2021.

The CIO-SP4 RFP was introduced to follow previous iterations of the contract — CIO-SP3 and CIO-SP3 SB, which each had a \$20 billion ceiling. Moreover, Deltek's Agency IQ profile report showed that both of these contracts saw unprecedented and continuous growth from FY 2017 to FY 2020.

CIO-SP4, which is valued at \$40 billion, will replace the previous CIO-SP3 and CIO-SP3 SB contracts. NITAAC plans to award spots to as many as 450 contractors by early 2022. The organization anticipates over 1,000 bids from large organizations and small businesses alike.

NITAAC will evaluate contractors on a number of criteria. First, vendors will be asked to complete a "self-scoring" sheet that details their experience on previous government contracts. Then, NITAAC will determine whether each business meets the criteria to advance to the next stage in the bidding process. Those vendors that advance to the final phases will be reviewed based on their technical offerings, as well as how they plan to staff and manage the contract if awarded.



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Amount of money for IT modernization





One key component of CIO-SP4 is what's referred to in the contract as "task areas." This is a wish list of sorts that outlines the specific areas where NITAAC is looking for assistance.

CIO-SP4 is poised to become one of the most transformative federal health contracts in recent history, aligning these task areas with HHS' many IT modernization priorities. The department is transitioning to a "cloud-smart" model, leveraging cloud computing for biomedical research and faster delivery of services. Meanwhile, mitigating data silos and creating a culture of data sharing within the agency has become increasingly important. The agency also recognizes a need to secure data from cyber threats, which have intensified in the wake of COVID-19. Finally, HHS is driving efficiencies across departments using automated processes and improving the user experience with human-centered design. These priorities

almost directly correlate with several task areas listed in CIO-SP4, including IT Operations and Maintenance (task area 5) and Digital Government (task area 8).

According to Brian Goodger, acting director of NITAAC, the contract will be awarded to vendors that can show proof of high-quality IT performance. The technical proposal is more important than the price of the service or solution, he said in [a recent interview](#).

CIO-SP4 TASK AREAS

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 IT Services for Biomedical Research, Health Sciences, and Healthcare | 2 Chief Information Officer (CIO) Support |
| 3 Digital Media | 4 Outsourcing |
| 5 IT Operations and Maintenance | 6 Integration Services |
| 7 Critical Infrastructure Protection and Information Assurance | 8 Digital Government |
| 9 Enterprise Resource Planning | 10 Software Development |

Source: NITAAC

A LOOK AT THE FUTURE OF FEDERAL HEALTH IT

If this past year has taught the healthcare industry anything, it's the importance of adaptability — being willing and ready to change course amid unforeseen challenges. Yager says the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting cultural changes have accelerated IT adoption, both in the healthcare realm and the government at large. It's a trend she expects will have a positive long-term impact on federal healthcare organizations — and, perhaps most importantly, the people they serve.

"We've been on a transformational journey, identifying areas that need to improve not only for our internal processes, but also reducing costs for the agencies we serve," Yager adds. "In terms of contributing to the health of humanity, IT modernization will only continue to open up more possibilities."

Curious to learn how National Government Services is advancing technology for federal health agencies?

[Learn More](#)

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Krista Yager

Chief Digital Officer
National Government Services

