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[State needs health information network](#)

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Patients and doctors and hospitals are all interested in one thing: making the best decisions for the health of the patient. Today, that means having the best information available and accurate when it is needed — in the doctor's office, in the emergency room or a walk-in clinic across town.

For years, records have been collected in medical files on paper. Sometimes these are thick files full of information on conditions, medications and treatment. Others are a blank sheet awaiting details on an unknown patient.

It was only four years ago that the first steps were taken in the mountains of Appalachia in northeast Tennessee and in the Mississippi Delta of Memphis to electronically connect the records of medical providers.

CareSpark built grass-roots support in the Tri-Cities area among health-care providers, purchasers and technology companies and launched a community-wide health-record repository and the exchange of demographic and clinical data. The MidSouth eHealth Alliance in Memphis began providing point-of-care use of health data to improve patient care at clinics and hospitals. Health Information Partnership for Tennessee (HIP TN) wants to build on the pilots of these two networks to create a health information network to improve health care from Mountain City to Memphis.

Last week, HIP TN, a nonprofit board with representatives of Tennessee patients, providers, health insurers, self-insured employers, hospitals, pharmacies and others, endorsed a plan to create a health information exchange that will further the efforts to replace the reams of paper with electronic medical records accessible to health-care providers all across the state.

Funds for federal match

The state plan has been developed in cooperation with a broad range of stakeholders across Tennessee from diverse medical, technical, legal and business backgrounds. It details the various components necessary to enable a statewide health information exchange and maps out a timeline, plan and budget. It looks at all aspects of health-information technology, including issues of importance to consumers like the privacy and security of records in the exchange.

State officials estimate the effort will take up to \$200 million over the next five years and involve more than 15,000 providers — from large hospital chains to small doctor's offices. To build momentum for this effort and provide seed dollars to attract support, Gov. Phil Bredesen provided \$15 million in funds for health information technology efforts this year. Those funds are vital to match federal dollars as the health information exchange encourages physicians and other providers to join the network now so it will be successful.

National studies, including one by the Institute of Medicine, suggest nearly 100,000 patients die each year due to preventable medical errors. The duplication of records and medication adds millions of dollars to the costs of health care. The sooner patients, doctors and hospitals are able to make the best decisions based on the best information, the better it will be for all of us.

Patrick Willard is the communications chairman for HIP TN and advocacy director for AARP Tennessee.