

The Direct Project

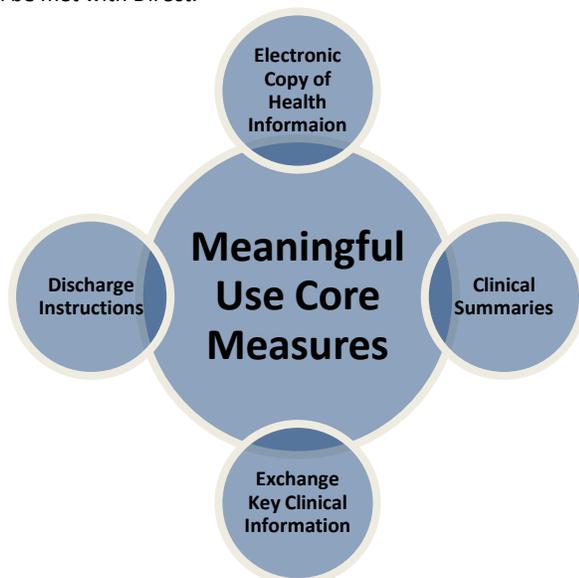
Scalable, cost-effective, secure transport of patient health information via the internet

The Direct Project was launched in March 2010 as an open government project guided by the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC). The ONC acted as the convener of private and public sector stakeholders to work on developing a simple, scalable, cost-effective solution to transport patient health information securely to trusted recipients over the internet using industry-standard technology for a variety of powerful use cases.

The Direct Project offers providers a simple, secure way to communicate protected health information – such as clinical summaries, continuity of care documents (CCDs), and laboratory results – to other providers who also own a Direct address. The most basic implementation of the Direct Project is secure email via an email client or web portal, which works just like regular email, but with an added level of security required to transport sensitive health information.

The Direct Project can serve as a solution for simple, point-to-point health information exchange. For those who do have an EHR, Direct can be used to meet the Meaningful Use (MU) requirements around electronic exchange of health information. Four MU Core Measures and seven MU Menu Set Measures could be met with various implementations of Direct.

For instance, a primary care physician (PCP) making a referral to a specialist can export a patient's CCD from the EHR, attach it to a Direct message, and send it over to the specialist via Direct. The specialist can then login to her Direct email account, open the message, download the CCD, and import it into her EHR. The following diagram illustrates the MU Core Measures that can be met with Direct.



Note: The Direct Project focuses on the transport of information and not on the content being exchanged. Therefore, anything from simple text narratives to structured documents, such as CCDs, lab results, or images can be exchanged using Direct.

Direct offers providers:

1. A simple, secure way to communicate electronically in lieu of commonly used methods of communication, such as the fax machine and/or courier mail.
2. An on-ramp solution to meet up to four core measures and seven menu set measures required for Stage 1 Meaningful Use (MU).
3. A guarantee that protected health information (PHI) travels securely to a trusted recipient.

The Direct Project has been designed to be used by:

- Providers (e.g., PCPs, Specialists)
- Other members of the care team
- Patients
- Laboratories
- Hospitals
- Pharmacies

And incorporated into the following user interfaces*:

- Email Clients
- Web Portals (or Webmail)
- Electronic Health Records (EHRs)
- Personal Health Records (PHRs)
- Health Information Exchanges (HIEs)

**The types of user interfaces available depend on provider preferences and vendor adoption in the local market (for example, are there EHR vendors in your market that have incorporated the Direct Project specifications into their products?).*

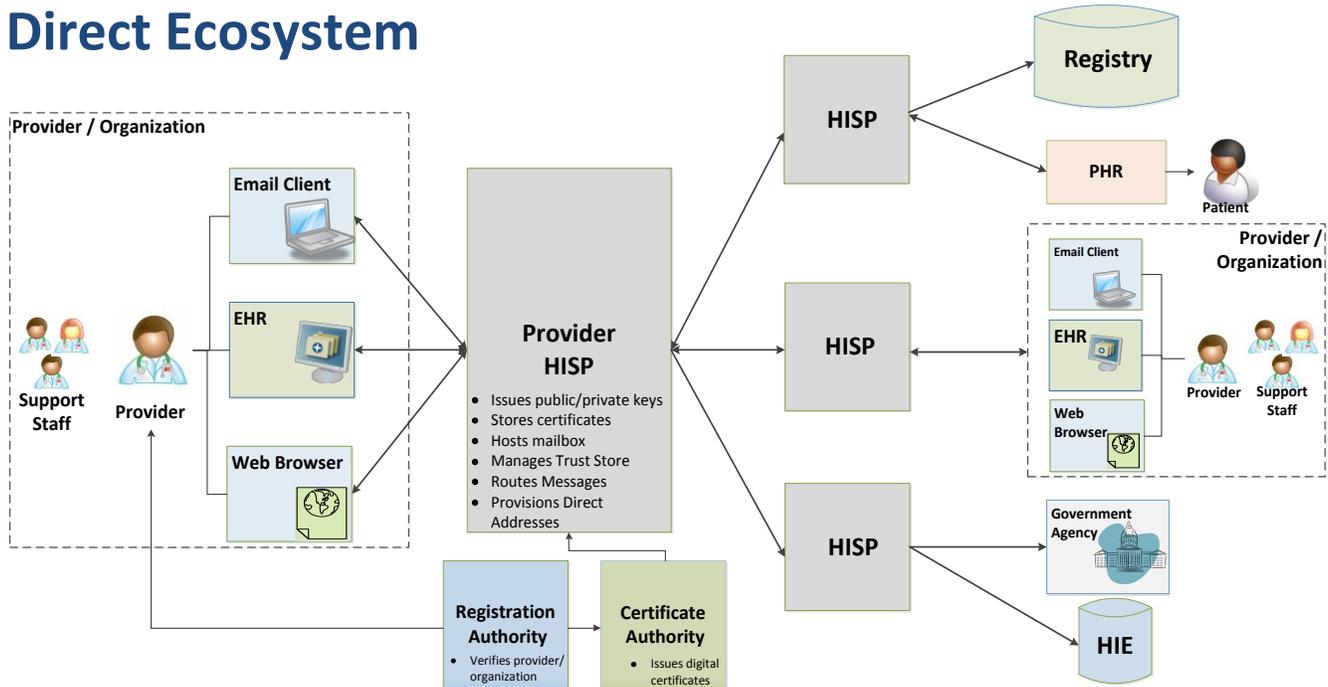
The Direct Project was designed to be an affordable solution for interested providers. A Direct address may cost somewhere between \$10-20 per provider per month, in addition to other setup costs. These costs may be at times bundled in with other HIEs, EHRs, or PHRs. In some cases Direct addresses will be offered for free.

To use the Direct Project (regardless of implementation model), providers will need to contract with a Health Information Service Provider (HISP).

What is a HISP?

A HISP is in charge of performing a number of services required for the exchange of health information as defined by the Direct Project. HISPs issue Direct email addresses, publish digital certificates to establish trust, and ensure that messages are routed securely to the intended recipient(s).

Direct Ecosystem



What makes Direct secure?

Direct is made secure by employing a Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) that encrypts messages and enables trust between two or more parties (possibly from different organizations or regions) without manual exchange of encryption codes. A Certificate Authority (CA) issues digital certificates to individuals or entities whose identities have been verified by a Registration Authority (RA). This ensures that Direct addresses are only issued to those who should be sharing PHI and have adequate security policies.

What is a digital certificate?

A digital certificate is an electronic credential and one of the main security components of the Direct Project. It establishes the identity of the owner of the Direct address and contains a unique key to decrypt Direct messages.

Where is Direct being used today?

Approved Direct strategy: Alabama, Alaska, American Samoa, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Guam, Hawaii, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virgin Islands, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming

Other states with Direct approaches: Delaware, Maine, Nebraska, Utah

There are two main implementation approaches for a state:

1. **Market-based approach:** Create a marketplace of HISPs that have been verified to adhere to HISP requirements, but let providers choose their own HISP and contract with them directly.
2. **Contractual approach:** Contract with one or more HISPs, become a HISP, or provide core services to HISPs.

Regional Extension Centers' role in Direct

Regional Extension Centers (RECs) are positioned, given their outreach within the provider community, to become the "go-to" place for providers to learn about and adopt Direct messaging technology. RECs can play a central role in making the Direct Project available to providers through education, outreach, training, and other services to increase adoption. State HIEs are taking the lead in offering Direct services as part of their state HIE strategies; however, there are some RECs that are playing a greater role beyond education and outreach. The following are some of the Direct-related services offered by the RECs across the country:

- **HISP Vendor Marketplace:** Market-based solution to help providers select a HISP that meets the standards they need.
- **Education and Training:** Access to educational and training collateral (e.g., Educational Webcast/Webinars, Best Practices Guide, Step-by-Step Guide).
- **Outreach:** Field Representatives to build awareness about the benefits of the Direct Project when assisting providers enrolled in EHR adoption programs.

Want to learn more? Contact your REC or HIE Project Officer or visit <http://www.directproject.org>