

NEWS

The Innovations in American Government Awards



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HEALTHCARE PROGRAM SERVING U.S. VETS WINS GOVERNMENT INNOVATION AWARD

HI-TECH VistA PROGRAM ONE OF TWO FEDERAL INITIATIVES TO WIN \$100K GRANT

WASHINGTON, DC— The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) model system of electronic health records, developed with extensive involvement of front-line health-care providers, has won a prestigious Innovations in American Government Award. The Award, a \$100,000 grant, is sponsored by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and is administered in partnership with the Council for Excellence in Government.

“This award tells the American people what millions of veterans and their families have known for years – that VA provides world class health care in a professional, compassionate and high-tech environment,” said Veterans Affairs Secretary R. James Nicholson. “It’s an honor for VA to receive this very prestigious recognition and I salute the VA caregivers who made this award possible.”

Outside of VA, because patient records are not readily available, one out of seven Americans ends up hospitalized when outpatient care is all that’s needed. For the same reason, one out of five lab tests is needlessly repeated outside the VA system. And while the costs of healthcare continue to soar for most Americans, the VA is reducing costs, reducing errors, and becoming the model for what modern health care management and delivery should look like. The VA is accomplishing this through a program called VistA, (Veterans Health Information Systems & Technology Architecture), an electronic medical record project that makes preventative care the norm. The system is designed and continually improved by front-line clinicians in the VA’s 1,400 health care facilities nationwide.

“The involvement of front-line providers, use of performance measures and universal use of electronic health records have enabled VA to set the national benchmark in quality of care,” said Dr. Jonathan Perlin, VA’s Under Secretary for Health. “VistA is an essential part of VA’s commitment to providing every patient with safe, effective, efficient, compassionate health care.”

VA’s complete adoption of electronic health records and performance measures have resulted in high-quality, low-cost health care with high patient satisfaction. A recent RAND study found that VA outperforms all other sectors of American health care across the spectrum of 294 measures of quality in disease prevention and treatment. For six straight years, VA has led private-sector health care in the independent American Customer Satisfaction Index.

Electronic health records also provide numerous other benefits in cost, quality and access to care. The cost of maintaining the system is \$80 per patient per year, less than the cost of one unnecessarily repeated lab test. In the last 10 years, VistA's efficiencies have offset cost increases associated with a 100 percent increase in the number of veterans receiving VA health care.

For example, VistA has helped VA save 6,000 lives by improving rates of pneumonia vaccination among veterans with emphysema, cutting pneumonia hospitalizations in half and reducing costs by \$40 million per year. Patient waiting times have declined while customer service improved, and access to care has increased because of on-line availability of health information.

In addition to saving money, VistA saves lives and ensures continuity of care even under the most extreme circumstances. Many of the thousands of residents who fled the Gulf Coast because of Hurricane Katrina left behind vital health records. Records for the 40,000 veterans in the area were almost immediately available to clinicians across the country, even though the VA Medical Center in Gulfport, Mississippi, was destroyed and New Orleans VA Medical Center was closed and evacuated. Veterans were able to resume their treatments, refill their prescriptions, and get the care they needed because their medical records were immediately accessible to providers at other VA facilities.

"This program's decentralized, flexible approach has made our veterans the recipients of the highest quality, lowest cost medical care in the country," said Stephen Goldsmith, Director of the Innovations in American Government Award at Harvard's Ash Institute.

"The award honors a program that honors our veterans, and that's something we are all very proud of." Patricia McGinnis, President and CEO of the Council for Excellence in Government, added, "It's great to see our government leading the way on health care. This is something that definitely should interest the private sector."

VistA is one of seven government initiatives receiving this year's Innovations in American Government Awards. Each winner takes a unique approach to meeting community needs and achieving real results. Because each of these programs is a model for government's capacity to do good, and do it well, the \$100,000 prize specifically supports dissemination to other jurisdictions.

The Innovations in American Government Awards honor city, county, state, tribal and federal government initiatives that are truly creative, measurably effective, meet a significant need, and have the potential to be transferred to other jurisdictions. The 2006 award winners, selected from an initial pool of 1,000 applicants, include two federal, two state, one county, and two municipal programs. The efforts improve conservation, healthcare, housing, education, social services, and law enforcement. The winners will be formally announced this evening at dinner event in Washington, DC.

The Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation (www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu) at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government fosters excellence in government around the world in order to generate and strengthen democracy. Through its awards program, research, publications, curriculum support, and global network, the Institute champions critical milestones in creative and effective governance and democratic practice.

The Council for Excellence in Government (www.excelgov.org) is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is to improve government performance by strengthening results-oriented management and creative leadership in the public sector, and to build understanding by focusing public discussion on government's role and responsibilities.

The VA's May 25, 2006 presentation to the National Selection Committee, chaired by David Gergen, at Harvard's Kennedy School can be seen at the Ash Institute's website:
<http://www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu/Ash/news.htm>. For more information on the Innovations in American Government program and this year's winners, visit www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu or www.excelgov.org.