A CALL TO ACTION
A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR DIGITAL HEALTH

by Christine K. Cassel, Wyatt W. Decker, Jonathan Woodson, and Jay Schnitzer

COVID-19 was our wake-up call. Our world was turned upside down in an instant as health officials, government leaders, and Americans scrambled to deal with a disease that we had no way to treat, and no way to cure. However, as they have in every crisis that has ever faced this nation, the American people rose to the challenge.

Now that the end of this global nightmare is just over the horizon, we cannot and must not slow down. We have seen firsthand how vulnerable we are. We have seen the need to instantly scale healthcare services. We have seen the vital role that digital technology has played in saving lives, and it is our responsibility to make sure that the lessons we have learned inspire us to climb even higher. We must do this not only to prepare for the next global health emergency, but to improve the health and well-being of our people every day.

With proper leadership, 2021 can become a significant inflection point in our nation's health and its public health history. The decisions that will be made in the coming months and years could set us on course to finally eliminate the tragic health disparities that were exacerbated by COVID-19. We now have the technology to make sure that every resident has the information they need to make the right choices for their health and the health of their families. We have the ability to instantaneously share data and evidenced-based treatments around the world. To seize this moment, we must have a national strategy for digital health that identifies a set of national priorities and guides the government and industry toward common goals.

If we let this opportunity pass, we risk worsening disparities in health by creating solutions that are only available to the privileged few.

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NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR DIGITAL HEALTH: STRATEGIC GOALS

Defining a national strategy for digital health is critical to ensure that digital technologies are not just "layered" on top of the current system, which is costly, inequitable for many, and often yields poor health outcomes. Federal agencies and other stakeholders are making significant investments in new tools; methods for capturing, providing, and using data; and innovative ways to provide health services. Yet, there is no agreement on a national set of priorities to guide this multitude of innovators toward common goals and priority

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outcomes. As a starting point, we put forward the following six strategic goals for revolutionizing the way we ensure the health and well-being of our citizens.

GOAL 1. **Access, affordability, and utilization of universal broadband for everyone.** As was powerfully illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technologies are now foundational for obtaining health services, support, and information. We must not only provide equitable access to affordable broadband, but we must also ensure that individuals can use it for health-related needs as well as opportunities in education, employment, social networks, the global economy, and nearly every other facet of modern life.

GOAL 2. **A sustainable health workforce that is prepared to use new technologies to deliver person-centered, integrated, quality care.** Digital technologies will impact traditional approaches to health occupations, tasks, and functions. Ultimately, a national digital health strategy requires a trained, sufficient workforce to meet the demand, changes in organizational cultures that lead to a team-based approach to care, and shifting "the locus of care" to empowerment of the family and home.

GOAL 3. **Digital technologies that empower individuals to manage their health and well-being safely and securely.** Digital devices and systems must be developed for collecting and using data to enable coordinated, holistic, and integrated care, equip individuals and providers with meaningful information, and enable greater engagement of individuals in their health and wellness. Foundational to meeting this goal is growing our collective understanding of how to make more and better use of digitally enabled approaches to care and ensure that they result in improved quality and outcomes while reducing costs.

GOAL 4. **Data exchange architectures, application interfaces, and standards that put data, information, and education into the hands of those who need it, when they need it, reliably and securely.** Data is the epicenter of the digital health ecosystem. There must be timely, reliable, and appropriate access, exchange, and integration of that data for various types of users—patients, clinicians, service providers, researchers, policymakers, government programs, technology developers. This interoperability will drive information-based decisions, enhance health services, and reshape how value is defined.

GOAL 5. **A digital health ecosystem that delivers timely access to information to inform public health decision making and action.** It is necessary to build a digital health information ecosystem that facilitates timely and complete bidirectional data flow throughout the federated public health ecosystem, in which constitutional authority to carry out public health functions lies with state health agencies, designated larger local public health departments, tribal nations, territories, and freely associated states. This transformation will use digital technologies and data to support a responsive, resilient public health system that facilitates timely bidirectional flow of the right information among diverse stakeholders to support real-time, evidence-based decision making.

GOAL 6. **Integrated governance designed for the challenges of a digital health ecosystem.** Widespread reform of the existing fragmented and out-of-date governance structures is necessary to actualize the benefits of digital health and to support smart and strategic investments, avoid duplication, and harmonize efforts. Industry requires comprehensive policies that (1) address data protection, privacy, information security, patient rights, and transparency; (2) establish protocols and standards to ensure interoperability and alignment of quality measures; and (3) ensure our national health security. This reform must be a holistic approach across all levels of government and encompass all stakeholders, to include health services providers, technology providers, hospitals, other primary care centers, patients, and other citizens, all of which must contribute to the development of digital health governance.

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MITRE has researched and identified candidate actions in the full version of the strategy, which leaders may consider for achieving each of these goals. Through a national strategy for digital health, federal leaders have an immediate opportunity to crystalize digital health efforts across the public and private sectors into an enduring capability to create a massive improvement in the health and well-being of people across the United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The authors include members of the MITRE Health Advisory Committee and MITRE's Chief Technology and Medical Officer. Through the Health Advisory Committee, MITRE engages visionary senior-level executives to guide MITRE and the federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs) we operate in identifying innovations and solutions to transform the national health and human services enterprise.

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ABOUT MITRE

MITRE's mission-driven teams are dedicated to solving problems for a safer world. Through our public-private partnerships and FFRDCs, we work across government and in partnership with industry to tackle challenges to the safety, stability, and well-being of our nation.

Your feedback is important to us. Please contact us at DigitalHealth@mitre.org to provide feedback or to schedule a discussion.

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