

National Provider Identification: A Primer on Applying

Ted Billings, MSW

If you haven't done so, now might be a good time to apply for your provider identifier required under Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in case things get bogged down nearer the deadline. It takes little more than five minutes online: if you have your social work license number, the rest of the information should be in your head.

HIPAA mandates that the Secretary of Health and Human Services adopt a unique health identifier for all health care providers. This National Provider Identifier (NPI) issued by CMS will replace all other identification numbers, including those assigned by health insurance companies, Medicare, and Medicaid. Some HIPAA covered entities, such as those completing electronic transactions, healthcare clearinghouses and large healthcare plans, must begin using the NPI by May 23, 2007. Small healthcare plans must begin using the NPI by May 23, 2008. (Although the identifier will be universal, credentialing will still be done by each individual organization.)

There are three ways to apply: electronically online, by submitting a paper application, or by having an organization apply for you. The easiest by far is the first.

To apply online, go to the National Plan and Provider Enumeration System (NPPES) website (<https://nppes.cms.hhs.gov>) and follow the instructions. As you begin the process, you'll create an ID and password for logging into the system. Once logged in, you'll need to provide your name, social security number, date of birth, state of birth, gender, mailing address, practice address, taxonomy (that is, provider type—I chose behavioral health, then social worker-clinical from the drop-down list), social work license number and state, any current provider numbers you might have (as, for example, from Medicare or Blue Cross/Blue Shield), and a contact name, phone and e-mail (this can be yours).

The process took me about five minutes to complete; two business days later, my ID number arrived in my e-mail.

If you prefer, you can submit a paper application through the Enumerator (a fancy term for Fox Systems of Fargo, ND, the contractor processing the applications and providing numbers.) Call 800-465-3203 to have the application sent to you, or download it at the NPPES website <https://nppes.cms.hhs.gov>.

Ted Billings, MSW, is in private practice in the District. He has lobbied Congress on medical privacy issues for the American Cancer Society.