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# FEHB Program Carrier Letter

## All FEHB Carriers

U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
Healthcare and Insurance

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**Letter No. 2013-18**

**Date: June 26, 2013**

Fee-for-Service [14]

Experience-rated HMO [14]

Community-rated [16]

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### **SUBJECT: The Blue Button® Initiative – Updating Guidance**

This carrier letter supplements the information in Carrier Letter 2011-21 (Blue Button Initiative) and provides updates to the request made in last year’s letter: that Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) Program plans provide members with their personal health information, via a Blue Button function on their portal or electronic personal health record (PHR).

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) provisions specify that an individual’s right of access to personal health records, as it applies to health plans, includes the health plan’s enrollment, payment, claims adjudication, and case or medical management record systems, as well as any records used in whole or in part by or for the health plan to make decisions about the individual (45 C.F.R. 164.501). With that in mind, we strongly encourage you to make the data elements included in the provision available for your members to download. For a listing of these data elements, please see the attachment to this letter.

Plans are also strongly encouraged to allow members to download their information, in multiple formats, following the options described by the new Blue Button+ implementation guide. The new implementation guidance has been developed through a public-private initiative for more advanced standards associated with Blue Button. These have been collectively termed “Blue Button+”. Blue Button+ guidance was created to give more specificity to plans and providers that want to empower their members and patients with health care data. While the original Blue Button was not specific about transport mechanisms or content recommendations, Blue Button+ has gone into detail about what data should be shared with members, and how it should be shared with them. Following the guidance will help members use their data interoperable with providers, caregivers, other health plans, and 3<sup>rd</sup> party applications. The added specificity should also be helpful to plans that have not yet added the Blue Button functionality. The guidance is available at <http://bluebuttonplus.org/claims.html>.

We also encourage plans to complete a collaborative process to develop a consensus-driven standard for sharing electronic explanation of benefits (EOB) data with members in a human-readable and machine-readable format. Some options for that new standard are discussed in the Blue Button+ documentation. Transport standards have also been described, in the guidance, for giving members meaningful access to personal health information. These include use of the DIRECT protocol as well as guidance on programmatic access via OAuth and RESTful APIs.

Lastly, we ask that each carrier report their current HIT initiatives and Blue Button capabilities to its contract specialist. If your plan does not currently have HIT initiatives in place, and/or does not supply members with downloadable personal health information, we ask that you research

the Blue Button functionality and supply your designated contract specialist with documentation on your strategy to implement Blue Button. Please provide the above mentioned documentation on your plan(s) by August 16, 2013.

As stated in last year's letter, supplying your members with the simple, low-cost and readily available Blue Button function will strengthen your contractual Health Information Technology (HIT) obligations under the FEHB Program, align your plan with the Meaningful Use standards laid out by Health and Human Services (HHS), and most importantly, empower your members to know their health information and make informed choices based on that information.

Additionally, Organizations which have implemented Blue Button technology in their PHRs report minimal implementation cost and development time due to the simplicity of the text format development and the ready availability of data used by the Blue Button function.

For more information on Blue Button, please go to [www.healthit.gov/bluebutton](http://www.healthit.gov/bluebutton). Blue Button+ Interim Implementation Guidance is available at <http://bluebuttonplus.org/claims.html>. In addition, the Blue Button Pledge Program is a voluntary initiative designed to support organizations that are sharing or using Blue Button data via the exchange of best practices, networking, access to educational materials, and opportunities to participate in discussions about relevant policy matters. To join the Blue Button Pledge Program, go to [www.healthit.gov/pledge](http://www.healthit.gov/pledge).

For technical or implementation questions, please contact the Blue Button team: [Apurva.Dharia@esacinc.com](mailto:Apurva.Dharia@esacinc.com). For other questions, please contact your contract specialist. Thank you for your cooperation regarding this important initiative and your commitment to the FEHB Program and your members.

Sincerely,

John O'Brien  
Director  
Healthcare and Insurance

Attachment