

Policy to Practice – The Role of Legislation at the National Library of Medicine

Policy Blog Post

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Many of us might remember the classic Schoolhouse Rock classic, [How a Bill Becomes a Law](#). I didn't think I'd have déjà vu with this civics lesson when I started my career as a new librarian at the National Library of Medicine. I started a little over a year ago as an [NLM Associate Fellow](#), and later joined the Health Information Products Unit as a Technical Information Specialist. One fellowship project involved helping NLM's Assistant Director for Policy/Legislative Development monitor legislation introduced in Congress that impacted NLM. I've seen firsthand how a bill can turn into a law and then effect NLM's ability to better serve the Nation. For example, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, H.R. 748 (116), provided supplemental funding of \$10 million to NLM to prevent, prepare for, and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. NLM, one of only four NIH Institutes and Centers that received funding in the CARES Act, has used the supplemental funding to support time-critical, COVID-related work on information services, research, and standards.

The policies that impact NLM or any government organization are complex, but through my work, I learned how to categorize aspects of policy into more digestible terms. In addition to helping monitor and analyze pending legislation, I categorized legislation and policies that impact NLM offerings by creating an internal legislative inventory. The inventory included authorizing legislation and mandating legislation. Authorizing legislation grants permission for an organization to engage in an activity, and mandating legislation requires that an activity be engaged in by an organization. There are many other types of legislation, such as appropriations, which allocates funds to organizational activities like the CARES Act.

Over the years, NLM has been authorized to provide many services. In my new role, I am especially interested in the ways laws and policies impact NLM's consumer health services. Consumer health is one aspect of NLM's authorities set forth in the United States Code of Federal Regulations. As a result, NLM has developed many consumer health facing products including [MedlinePlus](#), NLM's consumer health website, and [MedlinePlus Connect](#), a web application service that allows health organizations and health IT providers to link patient portals and electronic health record (EHR) systems to MedlinePlus.

MedlinePlus Connect is a particularly interesting example of an NLM consumer health service because it not only contributes to NLM's consumer health role, but it helps other organizations meet regulations. Healthcare providers' use of MedlinePlus connect is a way for them to provide a service that is responsive to regulations. This means that in addition to responding to legislation directly impacting the library, NLM also pays attention to policies impacting the different groups it serves. Under the Health

Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act of 2009, a part of the [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act \(ARRA\) of 2009](#), health care providers were incented to provide patients with patient specific education resources through their electronic health records (EHRs). As a free service, MedlinePlus Connect can help providers make this connection by enabling providers to link health information from patient portals to the MedlinePlus website.

MedlinePlus Connect is just one of many examples of how NLM functions to meet guidelines and orders set forth in legislation and provide essential services to the American people. As I settle into my DC apartment for telework, just south of NLM on the NIH Bethesda, Maryland campus I continue to reflect on my first policy project with NLM. Recently, as I run up and down the National Mall, I find myself thinking about the bill from Schoolhouse rock and what the future legislation and policies will have in store for the library's offerings, my work with consumer health information products, and the health of the Nation as we move into NLM's "third century" ([Brennan, Anticipating NLM's 3rd Century](#)).