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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. 2011-21**

**Date: December 19, 2011**

Fee-for-Service [15]    Experience-rated HMO [15]    Community-rated [17]

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**SUBJECT: The Blue Button® Initiative**

This Carrier Letter provides information on the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) Blue Button® Initiative. In this letter, we are requesting that Carriers enhance their Health Information Technology (HIT) efforts by adding the ability to download enrollee personal health information, in the Blue Button format(s), from their Personal Health Records (PHR). Supplying your members with the simple, low-cost and readily available Blue Button function will strengthen your contractual HIT obligations under FEHBP, align 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.

We ask that each FEHBP carrier add the Blue Button icon (See Attachment 1) and functionality to their PHR portals, which will provide patients with one-click secure access to download and/or print their own health information to a printer, computer, memory or mobile device and share that information with their health care team, care providers, or whoever else they choose. An essential feature of a Blue Button-enabled download is that the enrollee's health information be transmitted in an ASCII (text) format which can be read, stored, and printed on any computer without special software. In practice, the Blue Button icon can also refer to multiple methods of downloading health data (including PDF, CCD, XML and proprietary formats), so long as an ASCII option is presented to the member or patient.

In its simplest form, Blue Button downloads contain only patient-entered data. More contemporary Blue Button downloads offer clinical data drawn from electronic health systems or billing and payment data drawn from claims processing systems. Your plan should consider including information that is already maintained in your databases, wellness reminders, appointments, problem lists, medications, allergies, and lab results.

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. Existing privacy protection protocols are generally used and effective; many organizations remind patients that once they download their data, the patient is responsible for keeping it confidential.

To ensure that Blue Button data is freely available to all patients, VA registered the name "Blue Button," the Blue Button logo, and the slogan "Download My Data" with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. A license is needed to use the Blue Button Marks which VA offers at [www.va.gov/bluebutton/apps/License](http://www.va.gov/bluebutton/apps/License). *There is no cost associated with the Blue Button license.*

The Blue Button Functionality places each plan in line with the interoperability of data exchange with all Medicare members, TRICARE, VA, and many others using the Blue Button functionality as well as health systems supporting the Blue Button format. Since 2010, there are:

- over 250,000 DoD Blue Button users.
- over 350,000 VA Blue Button users.
- 47 million Medicare beneficiaries with access to Blue Button.
- major health plans are offering Blue Button to their commercial and Medicare members.
- physicians and hospitals across the country offer Blue Button-enabled PHRs to patients.
- many 3<sup>rd</sup> party web based and mobile applications and systems, Blue Button users can take advantage of by using their Blue Button downloads.

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 OPM with documentation on your strategy to implement Blue Button. Please provide the above mentioned documentation on your plans by March 15, 2012.

For information on the Blue Button website, please go to <http://bluebuttondata.org/>

For technical or implementation questions, please contact the VA Blue Button team: [vabluebutton@va.gov](mailto:vabluebutton@va.gov). 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 1: Blue Button Icon  
Attachment 2: Blue Button Overview Presentation  
Attachment 3: "How Blue Button Works" Presentation  
Attachment 4: Sample data dictionary