ORIENTATION FOR THE READER

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ORIENTATION FOR THE READER

This chapter explains the purpose and intended audience for the Reference Guide and familiarizes the reader with guide design and use.

PURPOSE AND INTENDED AUDIENCE FOR THE REFERENCE GUIDE

The purpose of the *Data Users Reference Guide* is to introduce health care data users to the Medicare and Medicaid program data maintained by the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA). The databases and files maintained by HCFA are a primary data source for researchers and analysts conducting policy analyses, program evaluations, and epidemiological research.

The *Data Users Reference Guide* was prepared by the Office of Information Services (OIS), Enterprise Databases Group (EDG). The guide describes the context and content of HCFA analytic data files and provides sufficient detail on individual files to enable readers to identify those files best suited for a particular research application. This guide is intended for use by a variety of analysts and researchers examining health care policy and health care financing issues. These individuals include HCFA and other government agency staff, as well as private sector researchers and contractors.

HCFA collects and maintains detailed records of the health care services provided to the United States population covered under the Medicare and the Medicaid programs. Extensive claim- and person-level records are maintained to ensure that disbursement of program funds is made in accordance with the statutes governing program implementation.

For Medicare alone, over 800 million claims are processed annually for covered services rendered to beneficiaries. To process these claims, beneficiaries and providers of health care services must be accurately identified, and benefit payment status must be determined to ensure proper program monitoring and implementation. The complexity of the statutes governing Medicare entitlement and coverage requires up-to-date, person-level information on beneficiaries and providers, and procedure-level detail on the history of services and supplies provided to each beneficiary. Daily transactions keep these records current for program administration purposes.

The Medicaid program presents different challenges for HCFA since HCFA does not process and pay Medicaid claims. HCFA is responsible for the general oversight of State Medicaid programs, including monitoring and reporting State program utilization and expenditures. To fulfill these responsibilities, data on Medicaid eligibles, recipients, services, and payments are collected and maintained by HCFA.

From administrative records, HCFA creates and maintains a variety of analytic data files. These files support the evaluation, tracking, and reporting of health care program costs and utilization; the development of program policies; and various epidemiological research applications. The Medicare and Medicaid analytic data files, rather than the administrative files, are the focus of this guide.

The confidential nature of the information contained in many of these files makes their release subject to the Privacy Act and other Federal government rules and regulations. Further information about HCFA data dissemination policies can be found in the HCFA Data Release Policies and Procedures chapter. For users who do not require personal identifiers in their research applications, OIS offers a public use version of the most frequently requested analytic files. These files are discussed in the Public Use Files Data chapter.

DESIGN AND USE OF THE REFERENCE GUIDE

The organization and layout of the guide are designed for easy information access. The following sections describe the organization and visual presentation of the information included in the guide. These descriptions are intended to facilitate guide use.

Reference Guide Organization

The Reference Guide is divided into three sections: Orientation, Data, and References. The first section, Orientation, contains introductory and background information, covering topics such as HCFA, HCFA data, and HCFA data release policies and procedures.

The second section, Data, contains database and file information. The data discussed in the guide are grouped into data chapters. Within each chapter, the databases and files are further grouped, as appropriate, by system or function. This subdivision, called "file groups," enables users to readily focus a search. Searches can then be narrowed to specific databases or files. The third section of the guide, References, includes Acronyms and a Glossary.

Reference Guide Layout

The Reference Guide incorporates a number of features which enable readers to quickly and efficiently locate information. These features include tables of contents, tabs to separate sections and chapters, custom page numbering, use of heading levels, and quick reference icons.

Tables of Contents

In addition to the Table of Contents at the beginning of the guide, each chapter contains a unique table of contents. These tables of contents are included to assist readers in moving directly to a particular chapter, and then quickly locate specific information contained within the chapter.

Tabs

Tabbed divider sheets separate the chapters within each section. Each tab within a section displays the chapter name. The divider tabs are color-coded to distinguish one section from another.

Page Numbering

Pages are numbered by chapter title and number. For example, the first page of the Claims and Utilization Data chapter is numbered, "*Claims and Utilization Data / 1*." This page numbering system assists users in locating specific information in the guide and will facilitate updating the publication.

Heading Levels

Throughout the Reference Guide, headings organize the text. Heading levels are indicated by combinations of font settings, print styles, and type sizes. Once the user is familiar with the hierarchy of information represented in the heading styles, the guide becomes easier and faster to use. For example, each of the chapter titles appears in the guide as shown in the following box:

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*C*LAIMS *AND UTILIZATION DATA*

The names of file groups within chapters appear like this:

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*N*ATIONAL *C*LAIMS *H*ISTORY *F*ILES

The file names appear as follows:

National Claims History (NCH) 100% Nearline File

Several headings and corresponding icons organize the content of the file discussions. These headings appear as follows, with the icon to the right of the heading:

File Creation

Icons

The use of icons in the file discussions enables the reader to locate particular types of information quickly, and facilitates recognition of similar types of information presented throughout the Reference Guide. The icons are displayed below. Each icon is explained in greater detail in the Overview of HCFA Data chapter.
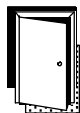
File Creation

File Maintenance

File Structure and Usage

Data Structure and Usage

Methods of Access

Migration of Data

List of Data Elements