Cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, data analytics and other technologies will be essential technologies in the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General's approach for overseeing the agency's COVID-19 response and recovery, the agency highlighted in its strategic plan Tuesday.
With any government funds, like the recent coronavirus stimulus payments and other funds aimed at tackling the pandemic in some capacity, preventing fraud, waste and abuse is paramount. Some critics have questioned if the funds are being distributed appropriately.

HHS as of mid-May has appropriated $251 billion of funding to respond to COVID-19, which includes $175 billion for the Provider Relief Fund and $76 billion for HHS Office of the Secretary and operating divisions in mitigating and countering COVID-19. To ensure that the agency properly allocates current and further funding, its new strategic plan lists four broad goals: to protect people, protect funds, protect infrastructure and promote effectiveness of HHS programs both now and in the future.

HHS OIG intends to deploy data-driven and AI technologies to prevent fraud, waste and abuse of the pandemic's relief funds, as well as cybersecurity solutions to maintain the IT systems, infrastructure and personal information and data collected and maintained by HHS programs.

“OIG is using risk assessment and data analytics to identify, monitor and target potential fraud, waste and abuse affecting HHS programs and beneficiaries and to promote the effectiveness of HHS’ COVID-19 response and recovery programs,” OIG said. “We use expert staff and modern tools and technologies, including artificial intelligence, to detect trends and patterns of suspicious activity and to shape and strengthen our oversight and enforcement.”

HHS OIG had already developed several data-driven strategies to oversee HHS program funding. As additional hundreds of billions of dollars are awarded to efforts to combat the virus, the office will continue to audit financial aid and relief programs with these advanced technologies.

The office also strives to promote best practices and share critical information as part of the plan’s fourth strategic goal. Data will be key in this area. OIG said it intends to share data analytics and technical assistance with HHS officials, as well as state and local entities, to strengthen HHS programs’ efficacy.
Part of these efforts will necessitate that HHS secures its IT infrastructure and assets, as well as Americans’ personal information and data. This third strategic goal — to protect HHS infrastructure — is a purely cybersecurity-driven endeavor, especially with the increase in cyberattacks against HHS, health care facilities and research organizations since the pandemic began.

OIG intends to protect HHS’s data, IT systems and health technology through four activities, including:

- Auditing HHS capabilities for detecting IT vulnerabilities and incidents, mitigating attacks and restoring IT services
- Auditing whether known cybersecurity vulnerabilities related to networked medical devices, telehealth platforms and other technologies used in the COVID-19 response have been mitigated
- Investigating cybersecurity threats to and attacks on HHS systems
- Technically assisting HHS to secure and support a robust IT infrastructure

As HHS OIG continues its oversight of COVID-19 funding and response programs, it has provided an online COVID-19 portal for the public to track its reporting and updates.

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