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IG: 37 COVID-19 Audits Are Underway, More to Come; Hotline Gets Telehealth Complaints

By Nina Youngstrom

The COVID-19 public health emergency is “taking center stage” at the HHS Office of Inspector General (OIG), but it also has eyes on “emerging areas,” including Medicare Advantage and health care technology, Principal Deputy Inspector General Christi Grimm said Oct. 1.

There are 37 COVID-19-related audits and evaluations underway, and more are planned, Grimm said at the Fraud and Compliance Forum sponsored by the American Health Law Association (formerly known as the American Health Lawyers Association). Telehealth services, Medicare’s 20% bonus for COVID-19 inpatients, infection control at home health agencies and Provider Relief Fund payments are just a few of the items under scrutiny.

“During the pandemic, OIG has not missed a beat. Given what’s at stake, we could not and will not,” Grimm said. In addition to audits and evaluations, OIG has produced guidance and waivers that give providers flexibility in terms of enforcement actions. OIG also has agreed to modify the terms of corporate integrity agreements and granted 15 payment extensions in civil monetary penalty cases.

OIG’s COVID-19 strategy has four goals. One is protecting people. “We are providing oversight to help ensure HHS’s efforts to protect people are effective,” Grimm said. For example, OIG is reviewing health and safety at hospitals, nursing homes and dialysis facilities; the COVID-19 testing supply chain; and disparities “exposed” by the pandemic “that are troubling.” OIG also is focused on the perpetrators who have adapted their fraud schemes to COVID-19. “It’s appalling,” Grimm said. “We are doing everything we can with our partners across the government to stop COVID fraud.”

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