eRA Strategic Plan
FY 2022 – FY 2027

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Electronic Research Administration (eRA) Program
# Table of Contents

*Executive Summary*  
  eRA Vision  
  eRA Mission  
  eRA Organization  

*Assumptions and Goals*  

*Goal Area 1: Partnership and Collaborations*  
  Enhanced marketability  
  Partnerships in development and delivery  
  Measuring success and making improvements  

*Goal Area 2: User Experience*  

*Goal Area 3: System Modernization*  
  Enhance system functionality and flexibility  
  Adopting new solutions and services  
  Achieving efficiencies through process optimization and automation  

*Goal Area 4: Artificial Intelligence*  

*Goal Area 5: Cybersecurity*  

*Appendix A: Governing Statutes and Policies*
### Revision History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Version</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tr>
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Executive Summary

This eRA Strategic Plan (FY 2022 – FY 2027) provides a framework for strategic and tactical initiatives that will advance the best and most effective investment of information technology (IT) resources, in alignment with the Secretary’s goal of “One Department” and the management improvement initiatives of the Presidential administration.

Over the last decade, eRA shifted its IT focus to a customer focus organization with a technical infrastructure to align with needed flexibility to achieve eRA program goals. This shift has been reflected in the eRA’s Vision and Mission:

**eRA Vision**
The eRA’s vision is to be recognized as the world expert and leader in grants systems and data. eRA seeks to be a vital partner in advancing efforts to increase the health and wellness of all people, by facilitating funding through its grants systems.

**eRA Mission**
To provide systems to manage the receipt, processing, review, award, monitoring and reporting of billions of dollars in research and non-research grants awarded annually.

This strategic plan takes into consideration the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) designation as the Grants Management Quality Service Management Office (QSMO) to transform government-wide grants management. HHS has been tasked with offering and managing a federal-wide marketplace of systems and service solutions to improve customer satisfaction, automate processes, modernize technology, standardize data and related processes, and achieve efficiencies in time and money related to the grant management life cycle.

As a QSMO solution provider, eRA’s strategic plan encompasses the transformation of grants management anchored by the Grants QSMO 2030 Vision to empower and enable applicants, recipients, and federal awarding agencies to deliver on their missions efficiently and effectively. This vision is reinforced by three pillars; to ease burden and drive efficiencies; respond to customer needs; and leverage data as a strategic asset.

The Grants QSMO will address the end-to-end grants management needs through three key roles:

<table>
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<th>Market Coordinator</th>
<th>Solutions Manager</th>
<th>Community Builder</th>
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<td>Execute the responsibilities of the QSMO including establishment of the grants management solutions marketplace.</td>
<td>Bring grants systems and services to the marketplace and oversee operations for QSMO-approved solutions</td>
<td>Establish and foster a community of practice to encourage sharing of best practices and learning across agencies</td>
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eRA supports QSMO in these roles as a provider of grants management services for multiple agencies and departments. Long-term strategic planning is essential to meet the expectations of HHS and other partners in the eRA ecosystem.

![Figure 1- The eRA ecosystem, which manages applications and other grant-related documents for end-to-end research application and award support.](image)

This plan will serve as a road map for business and information technology initiatives designed to move the eRA Program and systems from their current state toward that vision, while successfully fulfilling the Program’s intermediate goals and objectives at each milestone along the way.

As such, the strategic plan is divided into five major focus areas: Partnerships and Collaborations, User Experience and Support, System Modernization, Artificial Intelligence, and Information Security.
eRA Organization

eRA is a customer focused organization that provides highly efficient system capabilities in order to meet the needs of its users. To this end, eRA’s managers work collaboratively with stakeholders and customers to define, prioritize, and deliver quality products. Our strength is in collaboration and partnership and we have built an organization and structure to support it.

eRA's Management structure consists of Divisions and Branches that support its growth as a state-of-the-art solution provider in the federal government. These entities are responsible for defining processes and procedures, establishing best practices, managing work and resources, and ensuring eRA provides excellent customer service. The maturity of this model, outlined in the diagram below, ensures that our services remain high quality, efficient, secure, stable, and aligned with the mission of our clients.

eRA is a matrixed organization that includes business teams that align with the full spectrum of federal grants management phases. Each business team has multiple Agile delivery teams that are responsible for designing, developing, supporting, and maintaining the eRA suite of systems and services. Each business team has experienced subject matter experts that provide a wealth of knowledge for these particular business areas. In addition, eRA places an appropriate mix of skills in each team to accomplish assigned projects and activities. There is constant communication and collaboration amongst the business and delivery teams across the eRA program and with its customers.
**eRA Software Development Methodology**

eRA’s ultimate goal of using Agile is to get high quality products into the hands of our customers faster. With this approach the customer is deeply involved in developing the product and is able to “test drive” the product along the way. eRA’s Agile approach is built around the values and principles of Agile, Lean and Scrum.

Each Agile delivery team follows Scrum framework where the teams are planning, executing, inspecting, and adapting every two weeks. The figure below provides a high-level overview of the Scrum framework at eRA.

The Agile delivery teams use metrics and tools such as Sprint Burn-downs, Velocity, Cumulative Flow and Release Burn-ups to monitor the team’s sprint and release progress. To ensure quality is built into the process, the Agile delivery teams define their “definition of ready” and “definition of done” and plan these activities into their sprints. In addition, the teams apply Agile engineering techniques such as test automation, test driven development, pair programming, refactoring, continuous integration, and continuous improvement.
Assumptions and Goals

Assumptions
The plan is established based upon present-day assumptions about our future priorities and environment as well as statutory and policy drivers (illustrated in Appendix A). The primary assumptions regarding eRA’s strategic environment are:

- eRA will support an increasing number of partner agencies with varying needs in the business areas included in the Grants Management Federal Integrated Business Framework (FIBF)
- Expectations and deliverables will continue to be constrained by funding and resources;
- The emphasis on transparency will continue to increase.
- There will continue to be an increased focus on cybersecurity and privacy.

Goal Areas
eRA’s focus is on supporting the mission of NIH and partner agencies. By employing sound leadership and management controls, eRA provides tools to manage and report on grants, and a strong and scalable infrastructure while minimizing burden and being responsive to evolving security, technology, policy, and customer business needs.

To ensure that eRA stays focused on the structure and processes necessary to achieve these aims, eRA has identified five goal areas aligned with the organizational structure of eRA to take advantage of the planning, decision-making, and collaborative processes already in place: Partnerships and Collaborations, User Experience and Support, System Modernization, Artificial Intelligence, and Information Security.
Goal Area 1: Partnership and Collaborations

eRA will maintain its focus on partnerships and collaborations with customers, working hand-in-hand with the business communities it supports. eRA’s understanding of the needs and priorities of its customers is facilitated through active participation in stakeholder committees and user groups which serve to create collaborative rapport and trust.

eRA team members have expertise in specific business areas and on software infrastructure ensuring an integrated, end to end solution for customers’ business needs. eRA places high value on the user’s experience (UX) and incorporates User Centered Design into our processes ensuring an intuitive, consistent product that captures how the user engages with the system, (see Goal Area 2).

Enhanced marketability:
HHS is the designated agency for the Grants Management Quality Service Management Office (QSMO) which is challenged with the end-to-end transformation of government-wide grants management. QSMOs are tasked with offering and managing a marketplace of systems and service solutions to improve customer satisfaction, automate processes, modernize technology, standardize data and related processes, and achieve efficiencies in time and money related to the grant management life cycle. eRA’s strategic plan echoes Grants QSMO 2030 Vision to “empower and enable applicants, recipients, and federal awarding agencies to efficiently and effectively deliver on mission”.

This vision is reinforced by three pillars:

- Ease burden and drive efficiencies.
- Respond to customer needs.
- Leverage data as a strategic asset, by providing the framework for expansion of eRA support to grantee institutions and grantee service providers with enhanced electronic submission capabilities and support for grantee internal business processes.

Supporting the pillars:

1. eRA operates on the principle that successful partnerships are built on trust. This translates into ensuring that eRA delivers a reliable product, that fulfills the needs of the customer in a manner that is open and transparent. To achieve these principles eRA will continue to:
   - Engage stakeholders throughout the development and implementation processes
   - Involve eRA experts in appropriate business areas and infrastructure ensuring the delivery of a stable, secure, and integrated system
   - Effectively communicate through multiple channels about requirements and the status of the project
   - Provide ample opportunities for demonstrations, user testing and feedback
   - Provide access to libraries of Interactive training tools
2. eRA will continue to have and to strengthen a strategic focus on user experience observing how the users engage with the system with the goal of understanding how they navigate within and between screens being mindful of opportunities to reduce user strain by creating “smart screens” and reducing clicks and scrolls whenever possible (see Goal Area 2)

3. Continue to provide and enhance grantee institutions with value added services that support their internal business processes.
   - Access to shared information reduces the administrative burden on grantees as well agency staff and provides greater transparency and consistency.

4. Support and strengthen flexible approaches and smart design to nimbly accommodate the changing needs of partners as well as grantees which has the added benefit of:
   - Effectively insulating customers and allowing eRA to optimize functionalities for individual users
   - Allowing eRA to respond to unexpected challenges in a timely manner
   - Allowing eRA to leverage when possible, the systems and software developed for others to reduce costs, expedite delivery, and provide system consistency across the federal sector

**Partnerships in development and delivery:**
To achieve eRA’s vision to be recognized as the world expert and leader in research grant systems and data, eRA must continue to:
1. Provide awareness of eRA capabilities and garner high-level support by engaging with potential partners to discuss needs and explain system functionalities
2. Emphasize information system and data security in order to protect data and system availability
3. Be influential in the development of grant data policy
4. Ensure that eRA provided services are aligned with the business processes and goals of new, non-NIH partners by utilizing a phased approach to determine service fit
5. Empower and enable applicants, recipients, and federal awarding agencies to deliver on their mission efficiently and effectively.

**Measuring success and making improvements:**
eRA must be mindful of its abilities to deliver solutions that are consistent with its vision to be recognized as a world expert and leader in research grant system and data. Those abilities are contingent upon:
1. eRA’s approach of “iterative development and demonstration to the stakeholder” which solicits feedback on customers’ satisfaction with the product throughout the entire development cycle.
2. Regularly engaging stakeholders in order to exchange updates, and obtain enhancement requests
3. Internal processes that ensure eRA leadership is fully aware of project status, timelines, and costs in order to drive successful partnerships.
Goal Area 2: User Experience (UX)-

eRA focuses on User Experience in all aspects of the Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC) by incorporating elements of User Centered Design into our everyday processes, ensuring that in addition to business requirements, technical goals, and security, consideration for user experience is paramount. We engage users early and often with the goal being to deliver quality products that have a positive user experience. Our strategic focus on UX will be:

- Special emphasis on consistency across the enterprise - giving a familiar experience as users utilize various related modules within our program, accomplished by adherence to our program wide Design System, including a Style Guide.

- Reduction of burden for the end users as they onboard with our modules. More intuitive User interfaces, based on user research, will lessen the amount of initial training, ongoing help, and service desk support required by new and existing users.

- Continually evaluating the user flows, to optimize clicks and page views, to increase efficiency for everyday tasks

- Mobile friendly approach, with responsive user interfaces that are equally effective on tablets, laptops, large screens, and phones allowing our users to use a variety of devices to perform their tasks.

- Adoption of contemporary industry standard UX best practices allow our users to feel a sense of familiarity when comparing our systems with other applications they may be using in their everyday lives: from banking websites to shopping apps.

- Continual user engagement, both active (field studies, working groups, user research) and passive (analytics, metrics, surveys), to ensure the user experience evolves over time in concert with their needs.
**Goal Area 3: System Modernization**

eRA supports one of the largest grants management systems in the world. Rising budgets, expanding programs, scientific complexity, and increasing security and oversight requirements will continue placing even greater demands on the eRA program. These factors will drive continued modernization of the eRA system, to ensure optimal levels of performance, security, and agility to enable the program support business needs of our customer agencies and the applicant, reviewer, and recipient communities. The modernization efforts will primarily focus on continuing to:

- Enhance system functionality and flexibility to support changing business needs and ever-growing process variations across organizations and programs
- Adopt new solutions and services to reduce administrative burden on grantor and grantee staff
- Streamline and automate processes to achieve better business efficiency and optimize operational costs
- Refresh technologies to ensure that the system does not rely on outdated or end-of-life libraries and tools

**Enhancing system functionality and flexibility:**
eRA systems have proven to be inherently flexible, to support changing business needs and ever-growing process variations across organizations and programs. As additional agency partners are integrated, the need to ensure flexibility across a myriad of business processes will be paramount. Introduction of higher levels of flexibility into eRA systems will help ensure that customer agencies are effectively insulated from each other’s demands, while also allowing for the optimization of their own business processes.

eRA will continue modernizing our systems to provide advanced flexibility and support for the business process variations across grantor organizations and programs. This will be achieved by adapting available services across eRA applications as well as implementing and integrating new practices and solutions. The primary areas to accomplish these goals are:

- Enhancing the service governance process to better manage the growing number of services, both provided and consumed by eRA.
- Continuing our adoption of modern architecture solutions based on micro-services and composite services to further improve program agility and responsiveness to our customers.
- Continued focus on the development of shareable business services addressing the requirements of specific programs and organizations.
- Migrating eRA applications to use the new software infrastructure services developed by eRA which will support more flexible organization structures and the ability to better manage variations across business processes.
- Continued re-design of older modules to allow them to take advantage of current, as well as future services.
- Collaborating with eRA partners and user communities to identify creative solutions and services available within their organizations to develop enterprise offerings based on these discoveries and partnerships.
Adopting new solutions and services:
eRA continually re-examines user behavior, industry trends, and our internal infrastructure to take advantage of newly available services and platforms and to provide better services at optimal cost. We envision focusing on the areas below to provide new services to our users, increase efficiency, reduce administrative burden, and further improve cost management.

Cloud Computing
The 2020 eRA migration to AWS enabled the program to take advantage of cloud-based service offerings and enhanced flexibility. Strategically, the migration allows eRA to focus on the following areas:

- Increase the adoption of software-as-a-service and platform-as-a-service offerings to reduce operational costs and provide state-of-the-art services to our stakeholders.
- Perform more frequent upgrades of the underlying infrastructure to benefit from new hardware, virtualization, and networking options released by the providers.
- Take advantage of dynamic infrastructure provisioning capabilities to better adopt to the fluctuations in system use and better manage running infrastructure cost.

Mobile Access
The global COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the definition of the workspace and highlighted the need to empower individuals to access systems from anywhere using variety of the devices. eRA recognizes that the use of mobile devices by our customers will continue to grow. We will continue to enhance end user experience by:

- Modernizing older eRA applications to take advantage of the latest user standards defined in the User Experience Guide to provide consistent easy-to-use interface for the users.
- Working with business project stakeholders to ensure the new systems and solutions can be efficiently accessed from various types of mobile platforms, including current and emerging ones.
- Advancing towards Zero Trust Architecture to enable better user support across the platforms where current access methods may be impractical or unavailable.

Achieving efficiencies through process optimization and automation:
The ever-changing business processes and growing focus on security and oversight place increasing demands on both grantee and grantor communities, as well as eRA staff. eRA strives to increase efficiency and reduce burden for all parties involved in the grants management process. eRA will provide and support solutions to automate to the extent desirable end-to-end grant management processes, responsively and dependably. eRA will do this by:

- Expanding the use artificial intelligence (AI) and natural language processing (NLP) by eRA business systems to provide automation and assistance to the user communities and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the program.
- Advancing the use of the new system monitoring capabilities to utilize automated incident detection and prevention services, increasing system availability, and reducing the system support efforts.
- Taking advantage of various services available from service providers to further streamline our internal processes by simplifying and automating various aspects of the systems and infrastructure management by eRA staff.
Refreshing technologies:
eRA strives to ensure efficiency, security, and maintainability of our business systems. These efforts go beyond our software development and cover all components of the software supply chain for eRA systems and services. This demands continuous attention to availability, security, and efficiency of all platforms, products, and technologies utilized by the program. eRA will do this by:

- Performing market analysis and product evaluations to identify new products, services, or other solutions to better support and enhance business solutions offered to eRA users.
- Analyzing and tracking announcements by vendors and open-source community regarding major product releases, end-of-support, end-of-life, and other significant plans or events.
- Proactively planning and executing new product introductions, upgrades, or replacements to continue offering efficient, modern, and well-supported solutions and services.
Goal Area 4: Artificial Intelligence (AI)

eRA systems and services result in a wealth of data which is the basis for data driven decision making, simple and/or complex analytics, program planning and predictive modeling. eRA has a focus on utilizing Artificial Intelligence by deploying Machine Learning (ML), Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Thesaurus Based indexing. Currently AI capabilities are used to categorize disease/condition areas, automate the assignment of grant applications, and conduct powerful searches to find like characteristics in grants, researchers, and reviewers. This flexible infrastructure supports a variety of AI/ML algorithms and eRA will continue to explore opportunities for advancement.

Our strategic focus on Artificial Intelligence will:

- Extend our Artificial Intelligence infrastructure to support growing business needs and the expansion of rich data sets

- Conduct experiments using Artificial Intelligence models to assist and supplement key business processes and workflows including NLP algorithm enhancements for improved classification

- As a result of experiments, develop software using AI solutions to support new business processes, workflows and reduce administrative burden

- Continue to improve existing models and AI solutions including opportunities for data standardization as data sets grow and mature

- Expand cross agency collaboration, data sharing and data analytics

- Use AI/ML techniques to enrich eRA security practices including mining of logs and advanced analytics
Goal Area 5: Cybersecurity

eRA has made security and compliance a priority for many years and it remains an important focus, as underscored by the President’s May 12, 2021 Executive Order on Improving the Nation’s Cybersecurity. Many of the requirements and recommendations in the Executive Order have already been or are currently being implemented by eRA which serves as the framework for determining cybersecurity initiative priorities. The eRA Cybersecurity Goal Area will be addressed as a multi-year initiative, through the major efforts which are outlined in the remainder of this section.

Cybersecurity Executive Order Requirements

The full scope of the President’s May 12, 2021 Executive order and its impact on eRA systems is not fully known since it directs other agencies to provide guidance. This guidance is not complete, and even where initial drafts have been provided, it is likely that they will change over time. As a result, eRA will must continue to evaluate its security posture against current requirements and industry best practices on an ongoing basis. eRA has already implemented many of the requirements contained in the Executive Order. Of those that have not been implemented, some are awaiting pending guidance. The Executive Order contains 11 sections, of which Section 2 and Sections 5 – 11 will impact eRA through changes in policies and guidance at the DHS, NIST, HHS and NIH levels. eRA will implement any changes once the policies and guidance are issued. The requirements of sections 1, 3, and 4 of the Executive Order more directly impact eRA and are described below.

Section 1. Policy.

The President’s order prioritizes cybersecurity at the highest level in the following statement:

“it is the Policy of my Administration that the prevention, detection, assessment, and remediation of cyber incidents is a top priority and essential to national and economic security. The Federal Government must lead by example. All Federal Information Systems should meet or exceed the standards and requirements for cybersecurity set forth in and issued pursuant to this order”.

This is important because it emphasizes that even though Section 4 (Enhancing Software Supply Chain Security) primarily talks about commercial software, eRA will be expected to meet those requirements as well.


In this section the requirements for Federal Government networks and information systems are enumerated. The key provisions that impact eRA, what has been done before, and what remains to be done are summarized here:

- Advance towards Zero Trust Architecture – In September 2021 CISA released the Cloud Security Technical Reference Architecture and Zero Trust Maturity Model for public comment. eRA has reviewed these documents and many of the requirements for Zero
Trust have already been implemented. When the final versions of the documents are released, eRA will develop plans to implement any additional requirements.

- Accelerate towards secure cloud services – eRA has migrated its production operations to the AWS cloud. Further details of additional Cloud Computing efforts are described under Goal Area 3.
- Adopt multi-function authentication (MFA) – Federal staff and contractors using eRA systems have been required to use MFA for several years, and external users (the recipient and grantee communities) have had MFA optional for more than a year. eRA is currently phasing in the requirement to mandate the use of MFA for external to access the system.
- Adopt encryption for data at rest and in transit – eRA encrypts all data at rest and all data in transit external to eRA. Encryption of data in transit within the eRA boundary will be addressed as part of with the Zero Trust Architecture.
- Additional guidance related to cloud security and governance will be forthcoming and eRA will need to stay on top of these developments and conform to the guidelines.

Section 4. Enhancing Software Supply Chain Security.

Based on the definition of “critical software” developed by NIST pursuant to the Executive Order, the eRA system and much of the commercial software used by eRA is considered to be critical software. eRA will not only need to ensure that the software it procures and uses meets the established criteria and that eRA information system services contracts contain the proper language as it is developed, but eRA will also have to follow the guidance in this section including:

- Follow NIST guidance on secure software development environments – eRA currently meets NIST standards and will make modifications as necessary as further guidance is provided.
- Employ automated tools to maintain trusted source code supply chains – eRA will need to implement this once guidance is provided.
- Employ automatic tools to check for known and potential vulnerabilities – eRA already performs static and dynamic scans to check for vulnerabilities in the system before deploying software to production. eRA works with DHS, HHS and NIH to perform scans of the production system periodically.
- Maintain an accurate and up-to-date Software Bill of Materials – eRA as part of its build process, documents all components of the system. Once guidance is provided on the required format, eRA will modify its processes to comply.
- Participate in a vulnerability disclosure program – eRA is in the process of implementing the requirements of the NIH Vulnerability Disclosure Program.
- Conform with secure software development practices – eRA already follows a secure software development lifecycle and will monitor and comply with updated guidance as provided.
- Conform with newly published NIST standards for testing of software source code – eRA has reviewed the initial guidance and has determined that most of the requirements are already being met by eRA. Some adjustments need to be made, and eRA will monitor changes and updates to the guidance and will make adjustments as appropriate.
Appendix A- Governing Statutes and Policies

eRA Systems Impact

- HHS Policy for Section 508 Electronic and Information Technology, January 2005
- HHS Section 508 Implementation Policy, January 6, 2005
- HHS OCIO Policy for IT Enterprise Performance Life Cycle (EPLC), October 6, 2008

Federal

- Anti-Deficiency Act, 31 U.S.C. § 1341
- American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 (Public Law 111-5)
- Chief Financial Officers (CFO) Act of 1990 (Public Law 101–576)
- Clinger-Cohen Act (CCA) of 1996 (formerly the IT Management Reform Act of 1996 (Division E of Public Law 104–106) and Federal Acquisition Reform Act of 1996 (Division D of Public Law 104–106))
- E-Government Act of 2002 (Public Law 107–347)
- Executive Order on Improving the Nation’s Cybersecurity, May 12, 2021
- Federal Information Security Management Act (FISMA) of 2002 (Public Law 107–347)
- Federal Information Security Modernization Act (FISMA) of 2014 (Public Law 113–283)
- Federal Managers Financial Integrity Act of 1982 (Public Law 97–255)
- Federal Financial Management Improvement Act of 1996 (Public Law 104–208)
- Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1994 (Public Law 103–355)
- Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993 (Public Law 103–62)
- Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) of 1995 (Public Law 104–13)
- Government Paperwork Elimination Act (GPEA) of 1998 (Public Law 105–277)
- OMB Circular A–11, Part 7 Planning, Budgeting, Acquisition and Management of Capital Assets
• OMB Circular A–127, Financial Management Systems
• OMB Circular A–130, Management of Federal Information Resources
• OMB Memorandum 97–02, Funding Information Systems Investments, October 25, 1996
• OMB Memorandum 05–23, Improving Information Technology (IT) Project Planning and Execution, August 5, 2005

HHS:
• HHS Policy for Section 508 Electronic and Information Technology, January 2005
• HHS Section 508 Implementation Policy, January 6, 2005
• HHS Acquisition Regulation, December 20, 2006
• HHS Office of Acquisition Management and Policy (OAMP) — Acquisition Policy Memorandum No. 2008–02, October 1, 2008
• HHS Information Resource Management (IRM) Policy for Conducting Information Technology Alternative Analysis, February 14, 2003

HHS OCIO:
• HHS OCIO Policy for IT Capital Planning and Investment Control (CPIC), December 30, 2005
• HHS OCIO IT Policy for Enterprise Architecture, August 7, 2008
• HHS OCIO Policy for IT Enterprise Performance Life Cycle (EPLC), October 6, 2008
• HHS OCIO Policy for IT Performance Baseline Management, 2009
• HHS OCIO Information Security Program Policy, December 15, 2004
• HHS OCIO Policy for Department-wide Information Security, September 24, 2007
• HHS OCIO Policy for Records Management, January 30, 2008
• HHS CIO Roles and Responsibilities — Circular No. IRM–101, March 1999
• NIH OCIO NIH Information Security Policy Handbook, December 31, 2020