This summer, the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT announced it would restructure its staff and streamline its workgroups. But does the agency have enough staff and funding to be successful moving forward? This is an audio report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Rachel Dornhelm.

ONC is no stranger to big changes. Ross Martin, vice president of policy and development at the American Medical Informatics Association, remembers that when stimulus funds rolled in to kick off the meaningful use program. The ONC office grew from around 25 people on staff to more than 150.

Now, he says, with the expiration of the HITECH Act funds, the era of meaningful use implementation is over.

*Martin: “I think the reorganization gives an opportunity to say, 'Let's not only think of ourselves as a meaningful use instrument. Let's think of ourselves as truly coordinating technology in health care.'”*

ONC is shrinking its workgroups from 17 to 10. Martin says that means it can focus in on priority areas, like care quality and interoperability. Interoperability is a tune Martin has been singing for a while. Literally.

*MUSIC “I want to get in act of Hi TECH honey. And help build the network for interoperability. Dr. Blumenthal won’t you give me a call? so I can work at the ONC.” [fade under]*

While the content of this original video he posted on YouTube in 2009 has remained the same, many other things have changed since then ...

*MUSIC "Now that President O is doling stimulus dough we'll have harmony." [FADE OUT]*

With that stimulus dough gone, does ONC have enough to continue making progress on its mission? Martin says, maybe.
Martin: "I think we need to continue to think carefully about how we fund this. I don't think the current budget for ONC is really adequate, but we're all facing those challenges."

But others say it's the right mix of funding for the current workload.

Gilman: "ONC and its staff understand that now is a good time to work on policies and guidance, not regulations."

Tony Gilman is CEO for Texas Health Services Authority, a not-for-profit chartered by the Texas Legislature to coordinate the state's health information exchange, or HIE. He says the restructuring means the private sector will play a bigger role in enacting change going forward.

Gilman: "HIE is an immature market, and regulation will only slow progress and stifle innovation. Government participation, from my perspective, should be limited to catalyzing relevant markets."

Gilman points to a new program called Carequality, an industrywide initiative being managed by Healthway. He says this is one way the private sector is working together on interoperability.

Gilman: "CommonWell Health Alliance is another positive example of the industry working together to explore new emerging standards and promote alignment of policies necessary for private and secure information exchange across multiple vendor technology platforms."

Gilman says one important role of the restructured ONC will be continuing to bring stakeholders together.

Julia Adler-Milstein agrees. She is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan's School of Information, and she also teaches in the School of Public Health. She says ONC has been very good at gathering together private-sector leaders, academics and policymakers, and she expects that to continue. Adler-Milstein says she does expect the private sector's role in pushing change will grow.

Adler-Milstein: "I think they've always had a huge role to play, but I think it will be hopefully more proactive rather than reactive. I do think we've been in a phase where they've been waiting for meaningful use regulations to come out to see where to go next. And I do think we'll start to see that balance shift where it will be more driven by what are the needs of the private sector."

Adler-Milstein says it's important to note that none of the restructuring at ONC is unexpected because the end of the HITECH funding was long anticipated.
Adler-Milstein "It's a time when it makes sense to streamline your organization and with a leaner group really figure out the targeted areas you want to go after going forward."

Some of the areas ONC has announced it will target include advancements in science, public health improvement ... and interoperability. The last is on the minds of many experts.

Martin says there are a few other areas he'd like to see the ONC focus on as well, like developing leaders in the field and consumer empowerment.

*Martin: *"Industry if left to their own devices in the absence of even greater focus on payment reform, they'll not necessarily tend to the needs of the consumer. It's always going to be about how do we make sure our organization is paid and that's not always linked to quality outcomes."

How the next phase of ONC's operations plays out remains to be seen. But experts say that now that the groundwork in place, they are eager to see the next phase unfold.

This has been an audio report for *iHealthBeat*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you’d like to have addressed, please email us at *iHB@CHCF.org*. I'm Rachel Dornhelm, thanks for listening.