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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Tuesday Sept. 11, 2001

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HHS LAUNCHES INITIAL MEDICAL RELIEF RESPONSE TO NEW YORK, PENTAGON EMERGENCIES

HHS Secretary Tommy G. Thompson this morning activated the National Disaster Medical System, putting medical teams nationwide at the ready to be sent to assist local areas in responding to medical emergencies. This is the first time the federally-coordinated response system has been activated on a full nationwide basis.

The Secretary's action means 80 Disaster Medical Assistance Teams (DMATs) located throughout the country are prepared to be deployed, with 7,000 private sector medical and support personnel ready to be dispatched. HHS is working with other federal agencies and local health officials to assess specific needs in New York City and the Washington, D.C., area in order to direct units where their particular expertise and resources are needed.

"Today's extraordinary emergencies call for extraordinary response, and I have made the federal disaster response system ready nationwide, in order to ensure that we will have the total resources we will need to aid our people in any affected area," Secretary Thompson said. "Our emergency medical response system is ready to provide rapid strategic response, providing the assistance that is needed where it is needed."

DMATs have frequently been called into action for natural disasters, including a recent major deployment to Houston following Tropical Storm Allison this year.

In addition, other units of the Disaster Medical System have been activated under the order, including Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams (DMORTs), burn units, and the International Medical Surgical Emergency Response Team, located in Boston. They also will also be deployed as needed.

HHS is also working with local health officials to identify regional hospital capacity and provide for expanding access to hospital beds as needed in the New York and Washington, D.C., areas. Included in these preparations is action by the Department of Veterans Affairs to make available as many emergency beds as possible in affected areas.

National Disaster Medical System -- Background

HHS is the primary agency for coordinating health, medical and health-related social services under the Federal Response Plan, which provides for medical, mental health and other human services to victims of catastrophic disasters. The department's Office of Emergency Preparedness (OEP) is the medical "911" for all national catastrophic disasters - both natural and man-made.

OEP leads the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS), a partnership of four federal agencies - HHS, the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the private sector. The system has three components: direct medical care; patient evacuation; and non-federal hospital care. The NDMS also comprises more than 7,000 private sector medical and support personnel organized into 80 disaster assistance teams. These teams are deployed to provide immediate medical attention to the sick and injured during disasters, as well as mortuary and veterinary care, when local emergency response systems become overwhelmed.

In recent years, HHS has responded to an unprecedented number of challenges, including: natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and ice storms; special events such as the NATO 50th Anniversary Summit, World Trade Conferences, and the Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta; transportation disasters including TWA Flight 800, Egypt Air, and Alaska Air crashes; and terrorist events such as the Oklahoma City bombing. HHS also provides medical teams to assist the FBI, Secret Service and Department of State in the field.

In addition to the private sector component of the NDMS, the Commissioned Corps Readiness Force (CCRF) includes officers within the U.S. Public Health Service available for immediate deployment to disasters. Upon activation by the Surgeon General, the CCRF can provide public health personnel from various categories, which include: physicians, nurses, pharmacists, environmental health officers and mental health officers.

The web site for the Office of Emergency Preparedness is at: ndms.dhhs.gov/

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Note: All HHS press releases, fact sheets and other press materials are available at www.hhs.gov/news. Last revised: September 10, 2001

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