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Emergency Management: Using Public Messages to Direct Patients with Non-Critical Needs Away from Hospitals

SUMMARY

During large-scale disasters, emergency managers should establish shelters and alternative care sites. Public information officers (PIOs) should use public messages to direct patients with non-critical needs away from hospitals and to these facilities. This will insure that non-urgent care needs are met, while preserving hospital resources for emergency and urgent care.

DESCRIPTION

During the August 2003 blackout affecting the Eastern United States and Canada, hospitals in the Greater New York Hospital Association (GNYHA) faced a large influx of both critical and non-critical new patients. Hospitals experienced an increased demand for emergency and urgent care services like ambulance runs, laboratory tests, and dialysis treatment due to the closure of smaller urgent healthcare facilities. Non-critical patients also requested hospital services like prescription refills, routine healthcare, and even shelter from apartments lacking air conditioning and running water. Processing these demands diverted hospitals' energy and limited resources from critical services.

Emergency managers should establish shelters and alternative care sites during major disasters to address non-urgent needs and to conserve scarce hospital resources. According to the GNYHA, non-critical patients turn to hospitals when the public is not aware the locations of, and services at, alternative care sites and shelters. The GNYHA recommends that PIOs provide such information to the public during emergencies. Issuing public messages about shelters and alternative care sites will direct non-critical patients away from overtaxed hospitals and help ensure their needs are met.

CITATION

The Greater New York Hospital Association. *Testimony of the Greater New York Hospital Association on New York City Hospitals in the Blackout of 2003: Lessons Learned at a Public Hearing Held Before the New York City Council Committee on Health*. September 29, 2003. (<http://www.gnyha.org/testimony/2003/pt20030929.pdf>)

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