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LESSON LEARNED

Mass Care Facilities: Communicating with Patients who have Special Needs

SUMMARY

Managers of mass care facilities should anticipate the need to communicate with patients who have special needs and should arrange for services to be available when the facility opens. Managers should consider having a roster of persons qualified in areas such as American Sign Language (ASL) who are on call to assist with patient care.

DESCRIPTION

In the fall of 2007, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) sponsored the TOPOFF, or Top Officials, 4 (T4) exercise. T4 consisted of a full-scale exercise (FSE) that included functional and tabletop components as well. Arizona, Oregon, and Guam comprised the primary venues for the T4 FSE. Over 100 federal, state, territorial, tribal, and local agencies as well as private sector and international partners participated in the T4 exercise. The T4 FSE used a radiological dispersal device (RDD) scenario based upon National Planning Scenario 11 to test federal, state, territorial, and local capabilities. T4 exercised almost every capability within the DHS Target Capabilities List.

TOPOFF was a congressionally mandated terrorism preparedness program. It has been replaced by the National Level Exercise series of exercises.

The Multnomah County, Oregon, Health Department developed the public health component for the T4 FSE at the Oregon venue. This public health component had three principal elements. First, the county health department, in cooperation with partner organizations and jurisdictions, established a health/environmental unified command at the incident command post to manage tactical health and environmental issues at the incident site. Second, the county health department and its partners activated a medical care point (MCP) field emergency medical facility to relieve overwhelmed hospital emergency rooms. Third, they established a rapid screening point (RSP) to perform mass screenings of persons with possible radiation exposure, referral of those suffering from exposure, decontamination, initial mental health treatment, and registration of those exposed for follow-up evaluation. Over 400 players and 800 exercise actors participated in exercise events at the 3 locations.

During the FSE, fire department personnel conducted initial screening and triage of patients at the MCP. When a patient who was hearing-impaired was brought to the MCP for screening and triage, a fire officer who knew ASL was able to communicate with the patient. The officer accurately triaged the patient as needing immediate medical care and transferred the patient to a medical team for treatment. After the officer returned to his post at the screening station, the medical team members could not communicate with the patient because no one on the team knew ASL. Further, the team lacked plans or protocols for assisting patients who were hearing-impaired or had other special needs.

Managers of mass care facilities should anticipate the need to communicate with patients who have special needs and should arrange for services to be available when the facility opens. Managers should consider having a roster of persons qualified in areas such as ASL who are on call to assist with patient care.

CITATION

Multnomah County, Oregon, Health Department. *After-Action Report of the 4th National Top Officials Exercise Operations of Health/Environmental Unified Command, Medical Care Point, and Rapid Screening Point at Oregon Venue: October 16 - 19, 2007* Jan 2008.

<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=39182>

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