Teaming Up for Emergency Preparedness

How to Create a Partnership between Your Public Health Agency and Area Hospitals

Step 1. **Understand the goal of a hospital–public health partnership.** The partnership allows the local public health agency and hospitals in its jurisdiction to coordinate their response to bioterror, mass casualty, or other public health emergencies.

Step 2. **Educate key decision makers in the participating organizations about the benefits of a partnership.**

Step 3. **Form a partnership working group.** Ask each area hospital and your public health agency to appoint several representatives, including:
- open-minded problem-solvers who are diplomatic in resolving disagreements,
- staff members reflecting a diverse mix of strengths and expertise, such as an emergency room physician and a staffing director,
- representatives with strong skills in planning, training, and implementing change,
- effective leaders, and
- at least one high-level administrator with clout inside the organization and personal influence in the broader community.

Step 4. **Take time for trust-building and familiarizing.** Air common misperceptions among the participating organizations and ask each organization to summarize its strengths, needs, opportunities, and threats.

Step 5. **Through the working group, coordinate and delegate responsibilities for emergency response.** Give every member of the partnership an important role in implementing emergency response, but make sure that no member feels overburdened.

Step 6. **Through the working group, develop mechanisms to coordinate equipment purchases and share equipment.** Coordinate purchasing both for compatibility across the partners’ organizations and sharing of resources to prevent incompatibility of problems in an emergency event.

Step 7. **Decide on state-of-the-art communications tools all members can use to facilitate coordination during an emergency.** Deploying virtual meetings, dial-in conferences, e-mail, web-based conferencing, and data tracking in the working group lends practice that can be applied during actual emergencies.

Step 8. **Solidify the protocols and coordination mechanisms the partnership develops in a formal memorandum of agreement (MoA).**

Step 9. **Celebrate your mutual success.** Host an annual award gala or other event to acknowledge everyone’s hard work and reward those who have devoted extraordinary efforts to collaborating for emergency preparedness.

**OVERCOMING CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS**

MoAs can be difficult to achieve if the parties are receiving competing advice from their respective attorneys. Suggest that each partner appoint a high-level administrator who is dedicated to the partnership.
to manage attorney-to-attorney liaisons and foster good-faith negotiations with the other partners.

The partners should make trust building a primary day-to-day priority throughout the process. Take every opportunity to express respect and appreciation for the other partners’ expertise and professionalism.

The Montgomery County APC wishes to thank Cindy Notobartolo of Suburban Hospital, Bill Hentosh of Holy Cross Hospital, and Paa-Kofi Obeng, ASPH/HRSA Fellow, US Department of Health & Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, for their generous assistance in the development of this tip sheet.

This tip sheet draws on the experiences of the Montgomery County, Maryland, Hospital and Public Health Partnership Group (HPHPG). In 2001 the county’s Emergency Management Group Hospitals Committee recognized a need to coordinate and standardize protocols for delivering critical services during public health and medical emergencies. The HPHPG formed as a result and continues to meet monthly to discuss the partners’ needs and mutually held goals in emergency response planning. In April 2004 the members solidified the partnership through a memorandum of understanding executed by the five hospitals in the county, Kaiser Permanente, the County Fire Administrator, and the County Health Officer.

Key lessons learned from the Montgomery County hospital-public health partnership:

- Develop a unified response among the partners to potential public health threats.
- Support implementation of an automated system for early detection of illness and disease outbreaks.
- Use a common communication system, such as the web-based Facilities Resource Emergency Database (FRED), to alert all partners and track capacity during a mass-casualty emergency.
- Maintain and upgrade back-up communications systems, such as cell phones and satellite communications, for use if the primary system fails.
- Plan jointly how to alert the public about where to go and what to do in a public health emergency.
- Manage staff shortages with protocols to prevent duplication between hospitals and public health dispensing and vaccination clinics.

What are the benefits of a hospital-public health partnership? Consider:

- opportunities to build trust across the public health and medical communities
- coordination and economies of scale in training exercises
- coordination and economies of scale in equipment purchases and usage
- better coordination and reduced redundancy of staff and volunteer deployments
- means for fostering creative thinking, which the partner representatives can in turn pass on to their respective CEOs and spearhead within their own organizations
- practice in using advanced technologies for communicating across organizations

—in short, a more effective emergency response.