

SNAPSHOT OF EMERGENCY SURGE CAPACITY IN DENVER

At 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday, March 25, 2008, the majority staff of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform surveyed 34 Level I trauma centers in seven cities, including the Denver, Colorado area.¹ Level I trauma centers are hospitals that have the staff and facilities to offer the most comprehensive, around-the-clock trauma care. This snapshot survey found that there was little or no emergency surge capacity — the ability to handle a sudden influx of casualties — in the Level I trauma centers in any of the seven cities.

All three of the Level I trauma centers that serve over 2.6 million residents in the Denver area participated in the survey. Denver will be the site of the 2008 Democratic National Convention.

The survey assessed the capacity of the Level I trauma centers in Denver to respond to a terrorist bombing of a size similar to the 2004 Madrid bombing. According to the Centers on Disease Control and Prevention, the 2004 Madrid bombing, in which over 2,000 were injured and more than 270 patients were taken to one hospital within 2.5 hours, is an appropriate standard for assessing mass casualty preparedness.²

The survey found that on Tuesday, March 25, 2008, at 4:30 p.m. local time:

- **One of the three emergency rooms in the Level I trauma centers surveyed in Denver were operating above capacity.** When an emergency room reaches “capacity,” new patients can be accommodated only in overflow spaces, such as hallways, waiting rooms, or administrative offices. Of the three Level I trauma centers surveyed in Denver, one was operating over capacity, meaning they had no available treatment space in the emergency room to accommodate new patients. The average emergency room was operating at 92% of capacity in the Level I trauma centers in Denver.
- **The total number of available treatment spaces in the emergency rooms of the Level I trauma centers surveyed in Denver was insufficient to respond to a Madrid event.** After the Madrid attack, 270 victims were transported to one hospital for emergency care. Denver did not have sufficient treatment spaces in emergency rooms of their Level I trauma centers to handle the volume of victims treated at one Madrid hospital. In total, the emergency rooms in the three Level I trauma centers in Denver had only eight available treatment spaces, less than 3% of the demands faced by a single hospital in Madrid on the day of the bombing.

Surge capacity depends on more than sufficient space in the emergency room. A hospital must also be able to provide sufficient critical care resources, such as space in intensive care units, and

¹ Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Majority Staff, *Emergency Surge Capacity: The Failure to Prepare for the “Predictable Surprise”* (May 5, 2008). The other cities are New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Houston, and Minneapolis.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. *In a Moment's Notice: Surge Capacity for Terrorist Bombings* (Apr. 2007).

inpatient beds. If these beds are not available, patients who require hospitalization are frequently “boarded” in the emergency room until they can be moved to an intensive care unit or inpatient bed. On the day of the survey, there were such severe shortages of critical care and inpatient beds that many of the hospitals we surveyed were already “boarding” admitted patients in their emergency room. The survey found:

- **None of the Level I trauma centers surveyed in Denver had enough critical care capacity available to treat the casualties from a Madrid event.** After the Madrid attack, 29 patients arrived at one hospital in critical condition. None of the Level I trauma centers surveyed in Denver had the critical care capacity to handle this volume of severely injured victims. On average, the trauma centers surveyed had an average of only three intensive care unit beds available.
- **None of the Level I trauma centers had a sufficient number of regular inpatient beds available to absorb the casualties from a Madrid event.** In Madrid, 89 casualties required admission to a hospital bed. No Level I trauma center surveyed had enough beds available to accommodate a surge of this size. On average, the Level I trauma centers in Denver had only 12 beds available.

After conducting the “snapshot” survey on March 25 at 4:30 p.m., the Committee staff sent follow-up questionnaires to the hospitals surveyed. Twenty-three of the hospitals responded to the questionnaire. Their responses indicate that the level of emergency care they can provide is likely to be further compromised by three new Medicaid regulations, the first of which takes effect on May 26, 2008. According to these hospitals, the new Medicaid regulations will reduce federal payments to their facilities by \$623 million per year. If the states choose to withdraw their matching funds, the hospitals could face a reduction of about \$1.2 billion. The hospitals told the Committee that these funding cuts will force them “to significantly reduce services” in the future and that “loss of resources of this magnitude inevitably will lead to curtailing of critical health care safety net services such as emergency, trauma, burn, HIV/AIDS, neonatology, asthma care, diabetes care, and many others.”

One of the Level I trauma centers in Denver responded to this financial impact survey. Based on the estimates of the administrator who responded, this hospital could lose \$30 million to \$40 million in federal funds each year as a result of these Medicaid regulations. If the state were also to withdraw matching funds, this hospital could lose as much as \$81 million per year.