

June 9, 2008

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DHS to expand health system emergency preparedness efforts to primary care clinics

Helping primary care health clinics improve their ability to respond to a wide-scale emergency is the next step in statewide public health emergency planning efforts. A new report from the Oregon Department of Human Services outlines why and what should be done.

Medical surge capacity — the ability for a health care provider to rapidly expand services during a large-scale emergency — is a central concern for preparedness planners, said Mike Harryman, manager of the Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) program in DHS.

“During a major disease outbreak such as a pandemic, many people would turn to their local hospital or primary care clinic for medical treatment or advice,” Harryman said. “These facilities could quickly become overwhelmed unless they have already planned how they would respond to such a situation.”

Harryman said PHEP has made substantial progress in helping hospitals prepare for a major emergency by establishing regionally-based stakeholder boards and regional lead agencies to help facilitate and coordinate emergency preparedness activities across the state and integrate them with local public health, EMS and county emergency managers.

“These regional boards and lead agencies are doing a good job at reaching out locally to other partners in the health care system,” Harryman said. “We want to do whatever we can to enhance the work they’ve done.”

The next step is to improve the emergency preparedness and response capacity of primary care clinics, Harryman said. As a first step, PHEP commissioned a survey last fall to determine clinics’ readiness to respond in a major health emergency.

Among the findings: Clinics are not adequately prepared to respond to a medical surge of more than two weeks with an increased patient load of 25 percent; there is insufficient capacity for patients who do not have a pre-existing primary care provider and most clinics have not adequately planned for a wide-scale emergency.

“This report reinforces what we and our regional partners suspected — there is more work ahead when it comes to making sure the entire health care system can effectively respond to a wide-scale event,” said Harryman.

Harryman said the survey outlines the next steps:

- Primary care clinic personnel should be educated on how to use the Health Alert Network, a secure Web-based communication system that has the ability to rapidly push emergency health information to partners throughout Oregon.
- PHEP and regional partners should develop and communicate a statewide policy and strategy on where patients without a primary care provider should go during a major emergency, such as a pandemic.
- PHEP and regional partners should help clinics develop a communication strategy if they do not have staff who can effectively communicate with non-English-speaking patients.
- Clinics should consider purchasing and stockpiling additional personal protective equipment and certain medical supplies.
- PHEP and regional partners should develop a preparedness plan template that clinics can adopt or modify, which includes sections on family preparedness and clinic operations during a surge event.

More than 404 clinics responded to the survey of 1,054 primary care clinics. Responding clinics from across Oregon included those that are privately owned, those associated with a health system, federally qualified health centers, school-based health centers, tribal clinics and others.

The complete report, “A Survey of Oregon Primary Care Clinic Surge Capacity,” was completed by the Oregon Office of Oregon Health Policy and Research. It is available on the Web at <http://www.oregon.gov/OHPPR/RSCH/index.shtml> or by calling 971-673-1321.

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