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Network teaches care of community in crisis

Health professionals, emergency workers learn disaster response under federal grant

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If disaster strikes in Charleston, whether natural, accidental, or terrorist-orchestrated, the person who shepherds your child through those first scary, dangerous moments might be a school nurse. If there's an infectious disease outbreak, the person who takes your health history and gives you a preventive shot could be a dentist.

In times of unanticipated chaos, traditional professional roles go out the window. Every minute counts, and health professionals and emergency workers must step in wherever they're needed.

Doing that safely and effectively, however, isn't a process that comes naturally. Everyone's skills are in place, but like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, it takes some work to put them together.

Armed with a \$2.2 million federal grant, the South Carolina Area Health Education Consortium is training health care workers across the state to jump into action when the unthinkable happens. From identifying casualties in a mass tragedy to providing mental-health care for survivors, the tasks aren't in any health professional's everyday job description.

"People need to be given a sense in advance of what to do, of what could cause more harm than good," said Michael Schmidt, a microbiologist at the Medical University of South Carolina who steers the program's training on handling dangerous biological agents. "Otherwise it's like trying to raise an army when you haven't gone through an enlistment process or basic training."

By planning training related to Charleston's role as a port city and its proximity to military bases, the consortium's proposal beat 106 other applicants to win funding from the federal Health Resources and Services Administration for the two-year program, now in its second year. Organizers with expertise in disciplines from pharmacy to agriculture have trained more than 6,000 health professionals statewide, through conference seminars, practice exercises and distance learning via online resources and DVDs.

The program also has helped identify and address cracks in the state's disaster response system, such as a shortage of dentists trained to identify remains through dental records.

Beyond preparing for unimaginable acts by enemies, the Bioterrorism and Public Health Emergencies Training Network also arms health workers to respond to hurricanes or tornadoes, building collapses, hazardous chemical spills or fires. Organizers point to the Graniteville train derailment and chlorine spill on Jan. 7, the 2002 SARS outbreak, and the string of school shootings as times when health professionals were called upon to perform in unusual capacities.

Since the science of infectious diseases and bioterrorism is so fast-moving, the consortium's online education programs -- for which doctors can receive continuing education credits -- focus more on constants, such as legal issues surrounding disaster response. Among topics covered: how good Samaritan laws protect health professionals, and how to transfer a license or professional credentials to an out-of-area hospital if help is needed in an emergency.

Uniting different municipal jurisdictions is another goal of the training programs, since most disasters impact a broad geographic area.

If, for instance, a chemical spill occurred in North Charleston, the toxins could blow across the Cooper River and cause trouble in Mount Pleasant, too. Suddenly, areas that don't normally work together could suddenly be forced to join forces.

"It has always been true, but now it's become obvious," said Dr. Ralph Shealy, an emergency medicine physician who serves as one of the project's co-directors. "No longer can communities just work alone."

With the exception of public health workers, medical professionals are trained to focus on the individual -- the single patient before them who needs care. But in the event of a terrorist attack or natural disaster, that priority shifts to

orchestrating help for an entire community, Shealy said.

That may take the form of mass immunization clinics, housing people in a quarantine environment to keep an infection from spreading, or opening makeshift hospitals to care for thousands of casualties.

A crucial part of South Carolina AHEC's training helps health care practitioners understand that their jobs don't exist in a vacuum, and that they're tightly linked to a whole matrix of other professions that also protect public safety.

"Before, we knew what doctors did and dentists did and what policemen did, but the reality of a terrorist threat has made it obvious that our areas of responsibility and concern overlap a great deal," Shealy said.

School nurses are one group AHEC officials believe will be especially valuable in handling disaster situations. As caretakers for small children five days a week, they are often the first ones to identify kids' rashes, injuries and diseases, said Kim Merchant, president of the South Carolina Association of School Nurses.

That means they might have to sound the alarm for an entire community if a child comes into their office showing symptoms that might be linked to a bioterrorism agent like smallpox, or oversee setup of a shelter in the event of an attack or a hazardous material spill.

Those jobs are nothing anyone ever predicts. After the train wreck in Graniteville this winter, for instance, school nurses found themselves washing down walls and throwing away medications that might have been tainted by chlorine gas.

Since terrorist groups including Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida have made threats against "soft targets" like schools and hotels in the United States, school officials are on alert to anything that seems suspicious.

"Our whole society has had to change the way we live," said Merchant, the school nurse coordinator for Newberry County, near Columbia. "It does add another realm of responsibility. You kind of have to keep your sixth sense up all the time now to consider these things."

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