

**House Homeland Security Committee  
Subcommittee on Management, Investigations, and Oversight**

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Office of Health Affairs**

**Testimony**

**Introduction**

Good morning Chairman Carney, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this field hearing to discuss medical readiness and medical surge issues. On behalf of Secretary Napolitano, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and the Subcommittee for your continued work alongside the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to provide leadership in protecting and ensuring the security of our homeland. I would also like to thank our federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, and private sector partners, including the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and others with whom we work every day.

Today I will address medical readiness and medical surge within the scope of overall emergency preparedness and response capabilities. In particular, I will discuss the roles and responsibilities of the DHS Office of Health Affairs (OHA), and highlight key areas of coordination between DHS and HHS.

HHS is the lead federal agency for public health and medical preparedness and response issues and consequently coordinates and provides the healthcare and medical response in a major disaster or other catastrophic incident. DHS supports HHS in this mission.

## **Coordination with the Department of Health and Human Services**

The authorities for mass casualty events are enumerated in several places, including the National Response Framework (NRF) Emergency Support Function– 8: Public Health and Medical Services, as well as in statutory authorities. Per the NRF, HHS is the lead federal agency in preparing, deploying and providing health and medical care to the public in the event of a disaster or other emergency.

OHA and FEMA both work closely with the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on a daily basis to bolster our ability to effectively prepare for and respond to a major emergency.

## **Department of Homeland Security Responsibilities**

The Department of Homeland Security’s mission is to secure the country against the many threats we face; should a catastrophic incident occur, DHS leads overall incident management activities.

Medical surge capacity is a critical element of local, state and national resiliency. Local medical providers deal with localized surge needs on a regular basis. Mutual aid agreements, communications protocols and coordinated plans, all utilized by skilled professionals enable communities to deal with localized emergencies. The federal

government will continue to support local capabilities as we assist in the coordination of broader regional capabilities.

The focus of our planning at the federal level is on crises that overwhelm local and state resources. When a large-scale natural disaster or terrorist incident occurs, the ability to provide urgent and life-saving medical care, through coordinated resources from the local, state and federal levels, directly affects the ability to save lives.

Whether the event is the detonation of an improvised nuclear device or an influenza pandemic, the capacity to handle a large number of casualties will be the fundamental standard by which we measure success in our overall response.

In a large multi-casualty event, many emergency departments and hospitals would be overwhelmed with individuals suffering from illnesses and injuries ranging from relatively minor to life-threatening. In this situation, HHS would serve as the lead agency for coordinating health response activities. DHS would be responsible for support to facilitate effective medical response within the context of all the other demands of the event, including law enforcement, environmental, intelligence-gathering, public safety, communications, and search and rescue.

**Office of Health Affairs Medical Readiness and Medical Surge Activities**

Within DHS, OHA serves as the primary advisor to the Secretary and the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on medical and public health issues. OHA leads workforce health protection and medical oversight activities, leads and coordinates the Department's biological and chemical defense activities, and provides medical and scientific expertise to support DHS' preparedness and response efforts.

OHA, through its Office of Medical Readiness and in collaboration with other DHS components and federal departments and agencies, is working on a number of initiatives to improve our nation's medical readiness. OHA plays an important supportive role in medical and health disaster planning, overseeing the health aspects of contingency planning for all chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear hazards. OHA supports incident response operations by providing expertise and advice to the Secretary and FEMA Administrator and staff to the DHS National Operations Center and HHS Secretary's Operations Center, and assisting FEMA in evaluating state and local medical resource needs and requests during a disaster. OHA also provides medical subject matter expertise to FEMA's Homeland Security Grant Program, including the Metropolitan Medical Response System. OHA works to ensure that grant recipients across the country build medical response and medical surge capabilities by providing guidance and information to grant recipients and medical first responders. OHA is also facilitating medical and public health communities' participation in fusion centers. This coordination is beneficial because the health community can translate and share valuable health information, trends, and issues to inform actionable intelligence.

## **State and Local Response**

State and local responders play an essential role in the immediate aftermath of a catastrophic event. When a disaster strikes, it is the local first responders who arrive on the scene to provide initial assessment of the extent of the incident, the numbers of casualties, property damage, and resources needed to transport victims. Medical issues are addressed by local EMS, health care facilities, and public health agencies.

Depending on the magnitude of the event, the response activities (including personnel, equipment and supplies) will expand from local health resources to surrounding regions, state resources, adjoining state resources, and federal resources. DHS is committed to ensuring that the federal response, whether it is a medical, environmental, or law enforcement response, is well-coordinated with state and local officials to ensure a seamless and integrated response. The role of the federal government is to supplement state and local efforts and to provide assistance when it is needed.

OHA and FEMA work closely with HHS, states, and local authorities to develop inter-state and multi-state agreements to provide supplies, hospital beds, and medical professionals during a catastrophic event. These partnerships are important to ensuring medical surge capacity.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for having this hearing today. Medical surge capacity is a significant part of any effective national emergency preparedness and response capability.

I would be happy to answer any questions.