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Hospital disaster preparedness is critical

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Written by Chris Riddle

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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recently announced that it has awarded \$352 million in grants to help hospitals and health-care systems prepare for disasters.

This is a significant step toward ensuring that our nation's hospitals are ready for the unexpected.

When a tornado cut a mile-wide swath through Joplin, Mo., this spring, one of the biggest casualties was the institution that usually helps lead local emergency response: St. John's Regional Medical Center.

The hospital was leveled by the tornado, which claimed more than 150 lives, but was quickly able to resume service to the community with a 60-bed mobile medical unit.

St. John's response demonstrates what hospitals can accomplish in a disaster if they are prepared and assisted by good equipment and technology. And a dual effort by the government and the private sector is bringing that technology to more and more hospitals.



Within a week of the May 22 tornado that struck Joplin, Mo., killing 150 people, St. John's Regional Medical Center set up a temporary field hospital in the parking lot of the leveled medical center. / Associated Press

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The mobile unit at St. John's, for example, was purchased with the help of the Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP), administered by Health and Human Services. Grants such as these help hospitals get ready for unplanned events and the surge of medical activity that often occurs when an emergency strikes.

"We want every community to be prepared and resilient when faced with any type of health hazard, and we've seen preparedness steps pay off this year across the country with severe storms, floods and tornadoes," Nicole Lurie, M.D., HHS assistant secretary

for preparedness and response, whose agency oversees the program, said in a news release.

HPP funds have been used by hospitals to automate their preparedness plans, to purchase equipment such as the mobile medical unit in Joplin, or gear to allow communication with local emergency responders. Funds also support planning and training as well as exercises to practice evacuating facilities. For fiscal 2011, Tennessee has received almost \$7 million in HPP funds.

The value of these funds has been demonstrated repeatedly in recent years. For example, HPP funds were used to develop a regional hospital disaster plan in the Fort Hood, Texas, area that was activated after the November 2009 shootings that killed 13 people on the Army post.

The private sector is making a contribution, as well, by developing innovative products that help hospitals improve their handling of emergencies, such as incident response technology.

Currently, many health-care facilities use an inefficient, paper-based manual approach for implementing their incident command system. As a former hospital safety officer, I understand the difficulties of using the manual approach, and through my work with DisastersNet have helped hospitals automate their incident preparedness systems.

With the advances in technology and continued government support, hospitals and health-care systems have the opportunity to make great strides in ensuring that they are truly ready should a disaster strike.

Chris Riddle is founder and president of DisastersNet, an information technology company focused on helping hospitals improve processes that increase quality and safety of care. He also has more than 20 years experience as a hospital safety officer.

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