Issue Briefing: Home Health Care’s Role in Community Disaster Response

Home Care agencies are deeply embedded in the health and social fabric of their communities. Their daily work among the elderly, the vulnerable and the disadvantaged puts them in a unique position to assist the community during emergency events. Trained in syndromic surveillance, nurses are the eyes and ears of public health as they travel through city streets, neighborhoods, villages and country roads. The unique skills and position of home care providers and nurses in the community make them valuable assets in emergency planning and response efforts.

Recognizing this value, state and federal regulations, as well as accrediting agencies, require home care agencies to have organizational readiness plans in place for emergencies, though most providers go well above and beyond regulatory requirements to make sure their patients get the care they need during times of potential crisis.

A patient’s overall health and safety depend heavily on the care they receive through the home care network. Thus, in addition to an agency’s organizational readiness plan, the plan of care coordinated for each patient by the home care agency and skilled nurse case manager also includes an individualized emergency preparedness plan. This plan reflects the specific needs of the patient, who may be bedbound, technology-dependent, suffer from a physical disability, have few family or social supports, or otherwise require special attention during an emergency and/or local evacuation. Home care agencies must maintain rosters indicating priority codes based on these and other extenuating needs.

Prior to forecasted threats, such as snowstorms or hurricanes, agencies contact each patient and review patient-specific and agency plans. Those patients that are in severe danger from an imminent event are encouraged to evacuate and, in some cases, the agency coordinates the transportation.

 Agencies must plan to insure that their business operations continue during emergencies and must be prepared to provide care to their most critical patients under any and all conditions while protecting the health and safety of their staff. In extreme conditions, agencies may be asked to take on additional patients to free up hospital space for disaster victims, distribute medications to community residents, provide staff for medication points of distribution (PODS) or provide additional staff to hospitals. Agencies must anticipate and develop protocols reflecting all of these possible contingencies in their organizational response plans.

During situations that require sheltering, home care agencies frequently serve as medical staff for special needs or medical shelters, providing a wide range of care and support for shelter residents who may need assistance for wound care, medications or activities of daily living. As communities move towards recovery, home care assists patients to reconnect with services.

To assist New York State home care agencies with the difficult task of planning for and responding to a wide array of potentially dangerous events, the Home Care Association of New York State has, with funding support from the New York State Department of Health, produced an Emergency Preparedness Handbook for home care providers. The handbook has been distributed to all providers in New York and is available online at www.homecareprepare.org or by contacting HCA at (518) 810-0658.

www.homecareprepare.org