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New Tools Help Emergency Planners Select Alternate Care Facilities and Transfer Patients During Disasters

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Two interactive computer tools released today by HHS' Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality will help emergency planners and responders select and run alternate care facilities during disaster situations. In such instances, hospitals experiencing a surge in seriously ill patients requiring acute care may need to transfer less ill patients efficiently to alternate care sites.

Alternate care facilities are locations that can easily and quickly be equipped to augment or replace health care services when hospitals and other traditional care sites are inoperable or overwhelmed. Potential alternate care sites include college campuses, gymnasiums, schools, community centers, health clubs, convention centers or climate-controlled warehouses.

"Identifying alternate care facilities ahead of time and knowing what it takes to get these sites up and running quickly is critical to ensuring the safest and best possible care for the public during a disaster," said AHRQ Director Carolyn M. Clancy, M.D. "Experience gained from recent hurricanes and other emergencies have made these robust resources invaluable to emergency planners."

The two tools allow users to input information on their specific medical care needs and receive feedback on which facilities can become alternate care sites or which patients can appropriately be moved to those sites.

- "Disaster Alternate Care Facilities Selection Tool" is an interactive worksheet that assists users in selecting sites and identifying what they need to prepare these sites for use. It evaluates the characteristics of several potential facilities and calculates the results into weighted scores, which planners can use to select appropriate sites for care and plan for operations during a disaster.
- "Disaster Alternate Care Facility Patient Selection Tool" is a decision support tool that matches a hospitalized patient's clinical needs with the capabilities of an alternate care facility. This information may help clinicians determine which patients might be eligible for discharge or transfer to an alternate care facility to increase a hospital's capacity for incoming patients.

Under contract to AHRQ, Denver Health developed these new tools for AHRQ as an update of a previous alternate care site selection tool that it developed in 2004. In addition to changes that make the tools more user friendly, capability to capture richer demographic information, a simplified system to rate facility characteristics and a "necessity level" indicator that allows users to evaluate individual facility characteristics based on local or regional need.

AHRQ led development of the tools with funding from HHS' Health Resources and Services Administration's Bioterrorism Hospital Preparedness Program. The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response also provided input.

The two tools are available on AHRQ's Web site at <http://www.ahrq.gov/prep/acfselection/>.

AHRQ's role in federal public health emergency preparedness efforts is to conduct research and develop evidence-based tools and resources that emergency planners and responders can implement in the field prior to and during disaster response operations. AHRQ has developed more than 60 emergency preparedness-related resources; for more details, visit: <http://www.ahrq.gov/prep/>.

For more information, please contact AHRQ Public Affairs: (301) 427-1244 or (301) 427-1855.

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