

Many Southern California hospitals rebuff government over disaster plans

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In early 2011, federal and state officials asked 200 Southern California hospitals to provide information about their ability to survive a catastrophic earthquake along the southern San Andreas Fault.

The hospitals were asked, for example, how many backup generators they had on hand, what fuel they burned and whether their water tanks could survive the deadly rupture long predicted for one of the nation's most dangerous faults.

But nearly two years later, almost half of the hospitals still have not responded, leaving some disaster officials frustrated over their inability to help the hospitals plan for the worst.

The survey was aimed at speeding post-earthquake recovery efforts, such as rushing backup power generators, fuel and water to damaged hospitals struggling to care for patients. The concept was approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which would coordinate the federal response to such a disaster.

But only 50 percent to 60 percent of hospitals in the eight-county region returned the survey, according to an estimate by Dr. Howard Backer, director of the California Emergency Medical Services Authority. The rate was even lower in San Bernardino County, where many hospitals sit close to the San Andreas Fault.

The unsuccessful effort casts a harsh light on the potential pitfalls of forging public-private partnerships among health care facilities to plan for earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters.

One national emergency expert, Dr. Arthur L. Kellermann, said he finds the poor response inexplicable.

"This is FEMA, for God's sake, and federal agencies that are charged with helping hospitals in emergency events," said Kellermann, the Paul O'Neill- Alcoa Chair in Policy Analysis at the Santa Monica-based think tank RAND Corp.

"These hospitals are getting hundreds of millions - maybe billions - of dollars from Medicare and Medicaid every year, and they can't fill out a questionnaire of interest to the country and Southern California? I find that deeply disturbing," he said.

Disaster preparedness is taking on new urgency after the ravages of this fall's Hurricane Sandy. Backup power generators failed at several New York City area hospital and endangered patients' lives, especially those on ventilators and other machines.

After elevators froze, National Guard troops carried patients down as many as 15 flights of stairs at mammoth Bellevue Hospital Center in Lower Manhattan.

The vulnerability of those hospitals has revived concern about experts' predictions that more than 60 percent of Los Angeles area hospitals would be damaged beyond repair in a major quake.

local emergency agencies sent to hospitals in early 2011, some with an April 30, 2011, deadline.

The largest group of hospitals declining to participate was Kaiser Permanente of Southern California. A spokeswoman would say only that Kaiser had concerns about "the format and the amount of details being asked for in this optional questionnaire."

Among hospital groups that did cooperate were Dignity Health (formerly Catholic Healthcare West), three Providence hospitals in the San Fernando Valley and UCLA Medical Center.

After the survey stalled, data from cooperating hospitals remained with local agencies, and both Backer and his federal counterpart in the effort, Jerold Fenner, say they never saw a complete list of which hospitals did or did not participate.

Some officials said some hospitals feared government intrusion into their private business.

Backer said the low participation was over whether "the information would be kept completely confidential, whether it would be available to licensing agencies. That is what curtailed the results," he said.

Leaders of the California Hospital Association, the state's hospital industry group, were troubled that they was not involved at the start, and that the survey was issued outside "normal communications channels," said spokeswoman Jan Emerson-Shea. Her group later worked with surveyors to review and refine the questions, she said.

The hospital association, along with its member hospitals, are active participants in a variety of emergency planning organizations and initiatives, and hospitals fill out many surveys, Emerson-Shea said.

But the material sought in the 2011 survey is not on file at the state's two major hospital regulatory agencies, officials said.

The association's role in the survey is unclear.

Hospitals were told the association had both reviewed and endorsed the questionnaire.

Some local emergency officials, however, said the association's uneasiness with the survey had an effect. "They were watching over their members, but it ended up throwing a big wrench into the process," said Jerry Nevarez, hospital preparedness coordinator at the Inland Counties Emergency Medical Agency in San Bernardino.

Now, new talks have begun with the hospital association and state and local officials over fashioning an earthquake survey that would go to hospitals statewide in 2013.

Spurring the survey was a landmark 2008 report called "The Shakeout Scenario," produced by 300 top-level government, academic and industry experts.

The report was a wake-up call for Southern California. It scrutinized what damage would be inflicted by a 7.8-magnitude quake near the Salton Sea on the southern San Andreas Fault.

The impact would spread to nine counties, killing 1,800 people, forcing 50,000 injured to emergency rooms and ripping apart freeways and power lines, the report predicted.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Fenner recently returned from working on the federal response to Sandy.

For instance, FEMA has a cache of emergency backup generators that could be airlifted to a beleaguered hospital stranded without power, Fenner said. If his agency has that hospital's information filed away, FEMA could help federal authorities deliver the generator more quickly, he said.

Federal officials have collected that sort of information in other states, including hurricane-prone states in the South, he said.