

Planning for the Worst

UNOS keeps itself ready for severe weather

BY ELISABETH GABRYNOWICZ

“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” You can add “hurricanes” to that statement, and apply it to UNOS staff who are dedicated to keeping our nation’s transplant system running, 24/7/365.

In August, with reports of Hurricane Irene threatening the East Coast, UNOS took action to shore up its disaster planning and assist OPTN/UNOS members that might be adversely affected by the storm.

Some elements of the disaster relief and assistance plan came from lessons learned in 2005 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

ANTICIPATING NEEDS

UNOS staff from the Organ Center, IT, facilities, communications and patient services—in coordination with HRSA—planned for the worst while hoping for the best. While closely monitoring Irene’s expected path, the team met to discuss the possible needs of OPTN/UNOS members during and after the storm.

Before the storm hit, the team developed Irene-related notices for the OPTN and UNOS websites; the notices also were distributed through UNetSM and UNOS’ member e-newsletter. The notices included examples of protocols followed by member institutions during Hurricane Katrina.

The notices also reminded members that if there was a disruption of services at member institutions, UNOS’ Organ Center staff could help fill the gaps. Additional Organ Center staff, in fact, were on call for the duration of the storm.

The critical service gaps the Organ Center could fill include helping register new transplant candidates or donors; running organ-specific matches; assisting in organ placement and transportation; verifying blood type information for candidates and donors; and transferring waiting time for any candidates that required listing at an alternative transplant center.

UNOS also provided information to transplant candidates, recipients and their families on its websites, including, of course, Transplant Living (transplantliving.org). In addition, UNOS patient services staff stood ready to help patients in the event of service disruptions at a medical institution.

UNINTERRUPTED OPERATIONS

With Richmond on Irene’s projected path, UNOS took measures to ensure continuous, uninterrupted operation of the Organ Center.

Facilities staff made sure that fuel for the generator and supplies for staff during the storm were available. They even brought in cots, blankets and packaged meals, in case the storm made it unsafe for employees to leave the building.

A group of IT staff also stayed at UNOS in case Organ Center staff needed to move to UNOS’ off-site back-up facility. Miles away, UNOS maintains a back-up facility, set up as a fully functional “mini-Organ Center” ready to be put in use at a moment’s notice. It has the same security as the Richmond facility, as well as computer equipment, phones, faxes and printers; the off-site facility is regularly tested to make sure of its immediate utility.

As the storm raged along the East Coast, the Organ Center received word that a lung offer from a southern transplant center had to be declined, and a mid-Atlantic transplant center had to decline a kidney from Texas because flights were cancelled. Unfortunately, those challenges were beyond UNOS’ remedy.

An OPO in the north, however, had to evacuate its building, so calls to its placement center received a message to call the UNOS Organ Center for assistance. Thankfully, the UNOS department of patient services received no reports of any storm-related challenges from patients.

“UNOS staff work night and day—every day and in any conditions—to support transplants across the country,” said Brian Shepard, assistant executive director of contract operations.


“We are as dedicated and committed,” Shepard added, “as the people who depend on us.” 

Elisabeth Gabrynowicz, M.B.A., is director of the UNOS department of communications and a contributing writer.

PUBLIC COMMENT

OPTN BYLAWS OPEN FOR COMMENT

On Dec. 2, UNOS released proposed changes to the OPTN bylaws for public comment. The content of the bylaws is the same—but they’ve been rewritten into plain language and organized more logically to make them easier to read and use.

The OPTN/UNOS membership and professional standards committee (MPSC) will review the comments, consider modifications and submit the bylaws to the OPTN/UNOS board of directors for consideration at its June meeting. 

To review the bylaws and submit comment, visit the OPTN website at <http://optn.transplant.hrsa.gov/> (optn news > dec. 2, 2011). You also can send your comment via fax, (804) 782-4896, or by mail to Public Comment Coordinator, Department of Policy, UNOS, P.O. Box 2484, Richmond, VA 23218-2484.

Questions? Send an e-mail to bylawsrewrite@unos.org.