



Policy Brief: Rural Health Preparedness

The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) urges Congress to address the public health concerns of ALL AMERICANS while considering legislation to address our nation's disaster preparedness needs. Our health care system must be capable of responding to public health threats and emergencies. In order to ensure the readiness of the nation's rural health care system in times of crisis, it is important to remember that while the federal government needs to be a financial partner in this endeavor, the implementation needs to occur at a local level.

Each rural community needs to assess and determine their own appropriate response to domestic and international medical threats. Rural terrain is varied, vast, and rural transportation, population and economy vary greatly. The rural health infrastructure is already strained through years of chronic underfunding and further demands placed on the rural safety net. Rural residents are not always within 30 miles of a hospital, and not all rural counties have health departments. For these reasons, flexible, dedicated rural community funding to address rural readiness and to build rural infrastructure is needed.

The following key areas of preparedness must be addressed for all Americans, taking into account rural specific concerns:

- Public health infrastructure
- Communication and notification of bioterrorist threats
- Disease surveillance, disease reporting and laboratory identification
- EMS training and equipment
- Hospital capacity and workforce
- Dedicated decontamination facilities
- Medical/surgical and pharmaceutical supplies
- Training in bioterrorism assessment and treatment
- Mental health resources

Guiding Principles for rural preparedness:

- Major tenets for preparedness can be legislated and resources can be centrally collated, but funding and requirements will need to be flexible enough to allow appropriate solutions, according to the rural local needs.

- The rural health infrastructure (which includes workforce, EMS, laboratory and information systems) and components of the public health system (which includes education and research) must be strengthened to increase the ability to identify, respond to, and prevent problems of public health importance;

- Availability of, and accessibility to, health care, including medications and vaccines, for individuals exposed, infected, or injured in terrorist attacks must be assured;

- Health professionals, volunteers/ first responders, and the public must be educated to better identify, respond to, and prevent the health consequences of terrorism and promote the visibility and availability of health professionals in the communities that they serve;
- Mental health needs of populations that are directly or indirectly affected by terrorism must be addressed;
- The protection of the environment, the food and water supply, and the health and safety of rescue and recovery workers must be assured;
- Clarification and communication of the roles, relationships and responsibilities among health agencies, law enforcement and first responders must be assured. Simultaneous and coordinated systems planning must occur at the local, regional and state levels.
- Hospitals must be included as first responders for planning, funding and training purposes. Hospitals and health systems cannot be expected to absorb the costs of disaster preparedness alone and will need additional resources to fulfill their role in the emergency response system. As not all areas are directly served by hospitals, flexibility in funding will also be needed.

In addressing these rural needs, the variability of health infrastructures, capacity, capabilities and needs must be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the most rural, frontier areas, may lack even the basic health and infrastructure access. Federal legislation addressing national preparedness must recognize that public health threats can emerge anywhere at any time. A basic level of care for a national response must be developed and funded to ensure our national and rural preparedness.

The NRHA is a national nonprofit membership organization that provides leadership on rural health issues. The association's mission is to improve the health of rural Americans and to provide leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications, education and research. The NRHA membership is made up of a diverse collection of individuals and organizations, all of whom share the common bond of an interest in rural health.