

A NATIONAL SYSTEM FOR MEETING EMERGENCIES

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A new system for handling medical emergencies anywhere in the United States, called the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS), will be activated when the President declares a major disaster, when a national security emergency is declared, or when a state requests large-scale medical assistance, as in a major peacetime nuclear power plant disaster.

BACKGROUND

The NDMS was conceived in 1980 by medical planners representing the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Defense, the Veterans Administration (VA), and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The federal government had many plans to cover such disasters as tornadoes, fires, earthquakes, nuclear reactor disasters, and mudslides, but none of the plans were adequate for responding to the medical needs of victims and the surrounding community.

The Department of Defense (DoD) had begun to implement a plan called the Civilian-Military Contingency Hospital System for care of military casualties returned to the U.S. from a conventional conflict overseas. This plan added voluntarily precommitted beds in civilian hospitals to the VA hospital system to handle a large and sudden influx of wounded servicemen. The new NDMS system would be based on this existing system.

In late 1981, President Reagan also established the Emergency Mobilization Preparedness Board and several principal working groups including one on health. The President directed the Board and the working groups to develop policies and programs to improve responses to major disasters and emergencies using existing resources as much as possible. A key achievement of the Board and working groups was the further development of the NDMS concept and system design.

The plans for the NDMS were made public in June, 1984. The System has a twofold purpose: (1) to supplement state and local medical resources in responding to a major peacetime disaster; and (2) to provide backup medical support to the military during a national security emergency. The NDMS is not intended to replace or supplant existing plans or resources at the local, state, or regional levels. Rather, it supplements those resources when they have been overwhelmed.

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