

New York City's Health Department Improves Capabilities Post-9/11

New York City: Some 8.4 million people call it home. Daily commuters generate a net gain of 608,000 additional people each weekday, and tens of millions of people visit every year. Protecting a city of such magnitude can be a daunting task, and with new risks emerging every day, the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC Health Department) is constantly improving how it protects citizens and visitors alike.

On September 11, 2001, the United States experienced one of the most violent terrorist attacks in its history. In New York City, the World Trade Center's twin towers were destroyed, and emergency responders quickly deployed to assist victims. Along with traditional first responder agencies, the NYC Health Department provided key short- and long-term services in response to the World Trade Center attacks, such as assessing hospital resources, assuring mental health services, issuing public health advisories, assessing injuries and loss of life, and maintaining essential public health services amidst the chaos. Working closely with CDC, NYC's Health Department also assessed the extent of worker injuries at the World Trade Center site, monitored the environment for possible health threats, and implemented hospital emergency department syndromic surveillance systems to quickly identify disease outbreaks.

Post 9/11 Changes Identified During Comprehensive Review

A robust response structure

- a primary and back-up Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to manage response efforts
- comprehensive response plans

A robust exercise and training program

Improved communication and surveillance

Enhanced information technology infrastructure to support emergency response activities

Expanded and enhanced response staffing

- an expanded pool of leaders to run a complicated response
- pre-identified and trained staff to respond
- an automated notification system to rapidly contact staff

Expanded capability to communicate with healthcare providers

Automated syndromic surveillance systems to identify potential outbreaks

Guidance to address significant environmental issues

Since 2001, the NYC Health Department has responded to many emergencies, including the 2003 Blackout, H1N1 influenza, Hurricane Irene, and smaller disease outbreaks. Using PHEP funds, the main source of public health preparedness funds in NYC, the Health Department enhanced all aspects of its emergency response infrastructure. In doing so, it has dramatically improved its capabilities to meet public health preparedness and response needs.

Perhaps the biggest test of the city’s enhanced response capabilities was Superstorm Sandy in 2012. This storm is the largest Atlantic tropical storm on record, responsible for loss of life, record flooding, power outages, and the destruction of thousands of homes.

During the response to Superstorm Sandy, the NYC Health Department collaborated with the New York State Department of Health and other partners to coordinate the evacuation and subsequent return of more than 6,000 patients from 46 healthcare facilities in New York City. The NYC Health Department also developed a tracking mechanism to facilitate family reunification for approximately 1,800 long term care patients transferred to alternate locations throughout the city. Additionally, and unexpectedly, the NYC Health Department



led a multi-agency response in which teams canvassed door-to-door over 175,000 households to identify those in need of power, water, heat, and medical attention and made appropriate service referrals.

The NYC Health Department continues

to expand its capabilities by developing community engagement tools. A new public health emergency preparedness website and a much anticipated online portal will be launched, connecting more than 600 partners working on public health priorities across the city. This will allow partners to communicate frequently and quickly in preparation for and in response to public health emergencies.

The NYC Health Department is ever mindful of its mission to protect the health of all New Yorkers by preventing illness and saving lives. By using PHEP funds to expand its capabilities, NYC is significantly better positioned to respond to public health emergencies than it was more than a decade ago. Sustained PHEP funding will ensure these capabilities are maintained and that known gaps can be addressed in the context of a broad range of emergencies.



NYC has been the target of 16 known terrorist plots since September 11, 2001.