

# GNYHA's Role in Times of Crisis:

HELPING OUR MEMBERS  
**PREPARE** FOR  
EMERGENCIES AND  
**RESPOND** TO DISASTERS



## **GNYHA's Commitment: Helping Our Members Prepare for Emergencies and Respond to Disasters**

GNYHA is committed to ensuring that its members are prepared to respond to the wide range of emergencies, disasters, and events that might take place in the New York City region. For years, GNYHA has provided its members with training programs and educational materials to enhance their preparedness for such events. GNYHA has also created workgroups and hosted forums that permit members to discuss with other providers, key emergency managers, and public health officials how to respond to disasters in efficient and effective ways. These activities and preparations were never more important than when the World Trade Center was attacked on September 11 and subsequent anthrax scares occurred.

### **AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE REGION'S EMERGENCY/DISASTER RESPONSE SYSTEM**

Perhaps most important, GNYHA has worked closely with area emergency management and public health officials over the years and is considered to be an integral part of the region's emergency/disaster response system. In recognition of this role, GNYHA staffs a desk at the New York City Office of Emergency Management's (OEM's) Emergency Operations Center (EOC) during all disasters (such as the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center), major area events (such as the World Economic Forum), and anticipated possible emergencies like hurricanes and heat emergencies.

Grouped with local, State, and Federal health and environmental agencies at OEM's Emergency Operations Center, GNYHA is able to address members' needs during emergencies as well as to facilitate the region's medical response to disasters. From its OEM desk, GNYHA can provide members with up-to-the-minute status reports and other vital information, help solve supply and staffing problems, and act as a liaison between members and the various components of the emergency response system.

## Response to the World Trade Center Disaster and Subsequent Anthrax Attacks

On the morning of the World Trade Center disaster, the New York City Office of Emergency Management (OEM) called GNYHA within minutes of the initial plane crash and asked that its staff report immediately to OEM's Emergency Operations Center (EOC). GNYHA was also in immediate contact with the New York State Department of Health, which directed hospitals to activate their disaster plans and expect mass casualties, a directive that GNYHA communicated to its members by both e-mail and facsimile.

Moments later, OEM's Emergency Operations Center, which had been located at 7 World Trade Center, caught on fire from debris falling from Towers 1 and 2 and was evacuated soon thereafter. Given this situation and the scope of the

disaster, GNYHA established a command center at its offices and quickly mobilized its staff to assist members and to act as liaison to emergency managers, public health officials, and the public. Within hours, OEM established a replacement EOC at the New York Police Academy, and by late morning GNYHA re-assumed its role at the EOC helping members respond to the disaster. On September 11 and for many weeks after, GNYHA staffed both its desk at OEM and its command center at its own offices around the clock.

GNYHA's members also demonstrated quite clearly that they were prepared. Area hospitals instantly activated their disaster plans, canceled all elective procedures, freed up thousands of beds in anticipation of large

### Some of the Ways GNYHA Helped

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster on September 11, GNYHA:

- ▶ responded to members' requests for assistance to obtain supplies, to facilitate staff access into New York City, and to obtain information;
- ▶ helped government agencies collect key data regarding area surge capacity, event-related hospital visits, and patient information;
- ▶ helped New York City create its patient locator system to help family members determine whether loved ones had been treated in area hospitals.

numbers of admissions, reconfigured areas internally to make room for additional patients, and established triage centers on their streets. At the same time, many hospitals found themselves without functioning communications systems, and some went without electricity and were forced to rely upon emergency generators. Some were forced to shut down their HVAC systems as they were engulfed in dust and debris, and experienced dangerous drops in water pressure. Hospitals also established family centers and deployed workers to care for and counsel individuals who were looking for their loved ones, and ultimately requested that a patient locator hotline and Web site link be established. Finally, throughout the ordeal, hospitals acted as safe havens for individuals fleeing from the World Trade Center and even sent employees into neighboring buildings to make sure the elderly were safe.

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Anticipating possible additional attacks, GNYHA also began to hold briefings on identifying and responding to biological and chemical events, and to expand its e-mail and facsimile lists. As a result, by the time the first case of anthrax was reported in Florida, GNYHA was able to instantly transmit to its members health alerts from the New York City and New York State Departments of Health, as well as from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, that contained key information needed to diagnose and treat both cutaneous and inhalational anthrax. GNYHA also set up forums in which public health officials could share medical protocols and information needed to make quick diagnoses and protect patients and employees.

### **Emergency Preparedness Coordinating Council**

To help members review and enhance their emergency preparedness and disaster response plans in the aftermath of September 11, GNYHA has created an Emergency Preparedness Coordinating Council. The coordinating council brings together representatives of GNYHA members as well as local, State, and

Federal public health officials and emergency management agencies to encourage collaboration and communication across the region and ultimately ensure a more integrated response to any future attacks or events. Through this collaborative planning process, the council is helping GNYHA's members prepare for future disasters through the sharing of expertise, experiences, templates, and other information. The council is also exploring the potential for sharing services, where appropriate, to encourage efficiencies and cost-savings.

The coordinating council began its activities in early November 2001 and has met almost weekly since then, through full council meetings, workgroup meetings, or membership briefings on topics identified through the coordinating council.

## IMPROVING THE ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE AND RESPOND

GNYHA's emergency preparedness coordinating council has identified key data elements that should be collected before, during, and after an emergency, and has begun to collect data that providers should share with each other in advance of an emergency.

- ▶ **Emergency Contacts Directory.** To improve communications in response to an emergency, GNYHA has developed a directory of key contact information for local, State, and Federal agencies, private agencies, key vendors, and other services. GNYHA is also compiling contact information regarding members' emergency operations centers, command structures, and radio availability that will be added to the directory.
- ▶ **Surveillance Data.** The coordinating council is supportive of both the State's and the localities' efforts to develop regular syndromic surveillance in order to identify clusters of symptoms as soon as possible. Currently, 33 hospitals in NYC submit daily emergency department logs to the New York City Department of Health. The State is also developing a pilot project to implement this activity throughout the State.
- ▶ **Bed, Staffing, and Supply Needs/Availability.** The coordinating council is working with the New York State Department of Health to de-

velop and test a system designed by the New York-Presbyterian Healthcare System to collect data on bed, staffing, and supply needs and availability through a Web-based system that will be activated in the event of an emergency. Immediately following the World Trade Center disaster, GNYHA collected these data for numerous government agencies.

- ▶ **Event-Related Visits.** The Web-based data collection system mentioned above will be designed to collect information about event-related visits to emergency rooms, admissions, mortalities, and unidentified patients.
- ▶ **Patient Locator System.** Finally, the same data system will be prepared to collect the names of patients being seen at area hospitals during a disaster in order to create a patient locator system. The World Trade Center disaster demonstrated the need for such a critical vehicle to enable family members looking for loved ones to determine whether they may have been taken to a hospital. GNYHA assisted in creating this vehicle on September 11 by helping to organize patient names from area hospitals and in turn creating a patient locator system that could be accessed via New York City's official Web site.

## MINIMIZING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATIONS DISRUPTIONS

Many GNYHA members experienced significant disruptions in communication services as a result of the World Trade Center disaster either because of high call volume or because their communications infrastructure was destroyed. The following activities of the coordinating council are designed to minimize future disruptions:

- ▶ **Communications Options.** GNYHA has prepared a matrix identifying various communications options and describing each option's functionality and limitations.
- ▶ **Undertaking Risk Assessments.** The council has discussed undertaking risk

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assessments designed to identify vulnerabilities and solutions for avoiding potential disruptions. GNYHA has also presented a broader membership briefing on this issue.

- ▶ **Group Purchasing.** GNYHA Services, Inc., is negotiating group purchasing arrangements for several communications options and services, such as cellular phones with two-way radio options.
- ▶ **800 Megahertz Radios.** GNYHA has worked with the NYC OEM to facilitate the purchase of 800 Megahertz radios and the reinstatement of a special health care talk channel on OEM's radio system so that at least NYC area facilities can communicate with each other and OEM. GNYHA is exploring options for members outside NYC as well.

## DETECTING AND RESPONDING TO NUCLEAR, BIOLOGICAL, AND CHEMICAL EVENTS

The council has devoted significant efforts to enhancing providers' ability to detect and respond to nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) events.

- ▶ **Training and Education Programs.** Training and education are key to the health care system's ability to identify an NBC agent, to provide appropriate treatment, and to institute containment measures. To date, GNYHA has provided numerous briefings on these topics:
  - "Identifying and Responding to Biological and Chemical Events"
  - "Identifying and Responding to Anthrax"
  - "Use of Incident Command System"
  - "Identifying and Responding to Smallpox"
  - "Pre-Hospital Response to NBC Events"
  - "JCAHO Emergency Management Requirements"

Many of these programs can be viewed on GNYHA's Web site at [www.gnyha.org](http://www.gnyha.org) via streaming video provided by GNYHA's affiliate, Stream57. Additional programs are being planned on the topics of nuclear and chemical events, security and lockdown procedures, and evacuations.

- ▶ **E-Mail Service.** GNYHA provides extensive information to its members

through immediate distribution via e-mail of health alerts released by local, State, and Federal agencies.

- ▶ **GNYHA Web Site.** GNYHA provides extensive information on the issue of emergency preparedness on its Web site at [www.gnyha.org](http://www.gnyha.org).
- ▶ **Training and Education Materials.** GNYHA is currently working with the council to develop training materials on NBC events that can be used to train and educate the following audiences:
  - the community at large, the media, and area leaders;
  - employees of health care institutions;
  - physicians and other practitioners who must be able to identify and respond to such events.

The challenge is to take the extensive training and education materials that already exist and to distill them into useful, practical, and accessible formats to ensure broad-based education and distribution to the targeted audiences.

## DEVELOPMENT OF PROTOCOLS AND POLICIES

Finally, the council has been working to develop guidelines to address a number of key issues related to emergency preparedness, including the following:

- ▶ Responding to Nuclear and Chemical Events
- ▶ Biological Event Preparedness Guidelines
- ▶ Personal Protective Equipment and Decontamination Capacity
- ▶ Supplies and Stockpiles
- ▶ Internal Security and Lockdown Issues
- ▶ Employee Communications
- ▶ Managing Volunteers
- ▶ Media Relations
- ▶ Evacuation Procedures

GNYHA's Emergency Preparedness Coordinating Council is helping GNYHA's members prepare for future disasters through the sharing of expertise, experiences, templates, and other information.

## Emergency Contact Numbers

GNYHA general office number:  
**(212) 246-7100**

Recorded emergency contact  
information is provided during hours  
that the office is closed.

NYC Office of Emergency Management  
24-hour emergency number:  
**(718) 422-8700**

GNYHA emergency number in the event  
of disruption of office service:  
**(866) GNYHAGO (866-469-4246)**

GNYHA Web site:  
**[www.gnyha.org](http://www.gnyha.org)**



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*GNHYHA's emergency preparedness and disaster response activities are ongoing;  
updates will be sent to members on a regular basis.*