



State of New York
Department of Health
Corning Tower, Empire State Plaza
Albany, New York 12237

ANTONIA C. NOVELLO, M.D., M.P.H., Dr. P.H.
Commissioner

Phone: (518) 474-2011
Fax: (518) 474-5450

October 10, 2003

Dear Hospital CEO:

The Department has maintained an ongoing dialogue with hospitals on the issues associated with emergency department overcrowding and emergency preparedness. Over the past two years, concerns related to emergency preparedness have highlighted the importance of ensuring that each hospital maintains its capacity to accept and manage new patients presenting for emergency care. This can only be accomplished through the efforts of hospital administration to consistently monitor hospital operations, to aggressively address overcrowding and diversion, and to coordinate alternative care opportunities with community resources, nursing homes and other patient support services.

In conjunction with these issues, guidelines were previously developed to advise hospitals of their obligations and responsibilities in addressing the ongoing concerns of overcrowding and diversion. This information is again being shared with facilities as a reminder of the importance of these issues and of the Department's attention to statewide compliance.

Each hospital should review the information provided and ensure that steps are in place to provide for the implementation of all guidelines. Your full attention to this important issue is appreciated. Working together we can best assure that the needs of communities across the State continue to be met while maintaining the emergency capacity of all hospitals to respond to peak periods of critical need.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Antonia C. Novello M.D., M.P.H.".

Antonia C. Novello, M.D., M.P.H., Dr.P.H.
Commissioner of Health

Enclosure

GUIDANCE DOCUMENT FOR HOSPITALS
Overcrowding / Emergency Preparedness
Hospital Obligations & Responsibilities

Hospitals must meet the needs of the communities they serve on an ongoing basis. It is the responsibility of the hospital's Governing Body and Senior Management personnel to review the following guidelines and to implement, as appropriate.

- Emergency preparedness and readiness is not an episodic response, but is an ongoing commitment to maintaining a hospital's capacity and capabilities to respond to emergencies. Emergency Departments need to remain open and fully operational to ensure that each hospital is able to maintain the capacity to respond, not only to episodic events, but to long term or seasonal periods of overcrowding.
- Maintaining admitted patients within the emergency department is not acceptable. Hospital administration must be proactive in identifying and utilizing inpatient beds for admissions from the emergency department. All hospital beds and inpatient areas should be identified and considered in determining bed assignments. During peak periods of overcrowding, as a temporary emergency measure, the use of beds in solariums and hallways near nursing stations should be utilized consistent with a facility-wide plan to alleviate hospital overcrowding.
- Ambulance diversion is an emergency response to overcrowding that is to be used sparingly and only upon the direction of the hospital's key administrative staff. Hospital administration is responsible to document and monitor all diversion practices and decisions. As hospitals proceed with emergency preparedness planning, all trauma centers, hospitals, counties, and Regional Emergency Medical Advisory Committees, are advised to meet and collectively establish and/or assess the effectiveness of countywide or system wide diversion policies and practices.
- Hospitals are expected to have in place effective monitoring protocols to track and identify length of stay patterns and deviations, both for inpatients and for patients in the emergency department. Priority attention should be given to initiating inpatient and emergency department discharge planning activities to ensure the prompt and safe discharge of patients. Efforts to coordinate with community resources, nursing homes and other patient support services should be in place and functioning at all times.
- Ambulances and EMS personnel should not be detained in the emergency department and should be placed promptly back into service. To ensure that patient care needs are met by hospital staff, ambulance patients must be transferred promptly to emergency department staff.
- Hospitals should evaluate staffing levels on a hospital-wide basis. Cross training and coordination among programs and services is necessary to ensure adequate staffing levels during peak periods of need.
- Hospitals must assume responsibility for the quality and appropriateness of all patient care services. Regardless of location within the facility, staffing, services, privacy, infection control and confidentiality protections must be consistently in place.
- Hospitals must make available to ED staff the ancillary services which permit the prompt disposition of patient care needs. The 24-hour availability of transport services is necessary to meet patient needs and to allow for the timely transfer of admitted patients