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During Hurricane Response, Home Care Providers Take Action for New York's Vulnerable Patients

In the devastation of Hurricane Irene, home care agencies and their direct-care personnel are playing a crucial role to help those in need before, during, and after the storm.

"Home care providers and their staff are the eyes, ears and voice for many of New York's vulnerable patients during an emergency," said HCA President Joanne Cunningham, noting that, while the public is familiar with the important work of emergency management first responders, home care agencies have a unique role in emergency preparedness and response that may not be widely known.

"A home care nurse, aide, therapist or social worker is often a patient's main source of day-to-day contact, especially in the case of homebound patients," Ms. Cunningham said. "Direct-care personnel closely know the patients as well as their social and medical needs, and this knowledge is of critical help to emergency management officials and families."

"These heroic front-line personnel brave the elements to ensure continuity of service and the safety of patients even as they must cope with the urgent needs of their own homes and families during a crisis," Ms. Cunningham added.

Unlike other areas of health care, the expertise of home care agencies and staff is rooted in the delivery of services to patients in their home environment, where possible risks to the patient's health and safety might otherwise be invisible to emergency management entities concentrating on outside environmental factors.

When a storm or other natural disaster like Hurricane Irene strikes, home care agencies in emergency zones identify thousands of elderly, disabled, chronically-ill and other vulnerable patients on their patient rosters who are in need of evacuation to emergency shelters, with particular concern for patients who depend upon life-sustaining in-home medical equipment susceptible to power outages. Home care agencies also consult with and help patients plan for evacuation in the lead-up to a storm.

In cases where patients are not evacuated during a disaster, home care providers are professionally well equipped to assess the safety of the patient's living environment and ensure that the patient has access to basic necessities, including medications or nutritional supplies, given that such assessments are the home care clinician's task every single day as part of his or her clinical duties. Direct-care personnel must often take extraordinary measures and considerable risk to traverse the landscape and to guide and serve patients during an emergency.

Ms. Cunningham said: "Because the home care agency and its clinicians are essentially the primary care coordinators who see these patients on a routine basis, they know the patient's medical history, they know the patient's home environment and its proximity to flooded areas or other access issues, and they are best suited to address specific needs, especially during a time of crisis, shortages or limited access."

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Once a storm has subsided and evacuated patients return home, home care agencies play an important follow-up role as well, ensuring continuity of vital medical, therapeutic and assistive services while working with social services agencies and other entities to make certain that the home environment remains safe for the patient. With washed-out roads, bridges and other infrastructure limitations, a home care agency and its direct-care personnel may be the patient's sole access to health services and other basic necessities in the aftermath of a natural disaster.

The role of home care in emergency situations is not restricted to response efforts. Just as home care providers offer preventive health services to help keep patients out of the hospital or nursing home, they also offer preventive emergency preparedness services. Home care agencies and their clinicians are trained to ensure that patients have emergency kits, operable smoke detectors, as well as a "go-bag" of medications/prescriptions, identification cards and other important items that can be quickly gathered and brought with the patient in the event of an evacuation, especially when a storm or other emergency situation is known to be imminent. Such is the case for hurricane preparedness in coastal and flood-prone areas as well as for winter weather disasters in northern and western New York.

For specific information about the role of home care providers during Hurricane Irene in your community, please contact HCA's Communications Director Roger Noyes at (518) 810-0665 or rnoyes@hcanys.org.

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