

**Definition and Standardization of Healthcare Preparedness
Breakout Session
July 21, 2009**

Summary of Key Points

Question 1: What are the most important elements of healthcare preparedness for your organization or program?

The most important element identified was the availability of dedicated and sustained funding for everything from supplies and equipment to training and exercises to volunteer management to evaluation to administrative costs. Also significant was the development of healthcare coalitions and the collaborative relationships they engendered. The development of system-wide memoranda of understanding (MOUs) that detail resource-sharing among partners and address liability, reimbursement, and jurisdiction issues was important. Along the same lines, participants identified the tiered response system (for both planning and response) as a vital factor, as well as regional coordination among multiple agencies.

The ability to conduct widespread training involving multiple agencies and system-wide exercises also weighed heavily. A number of participants highlighted the importance of having well-developed, standardized emergency operations plans and incorporating emergency management principles into daily operations. The development of standardized measures that define a minimal level of preparedness was also seen as important. Most of the key elements rely on buy-in, support, and involvement of upper management.

Question 2: Over the past five years or so, what have been the most important indicators of preparedness?

Overwhelmingly, participants said the response to real-life events is the most significant indicator of preparedness. Short of that, demonstrated improvement in plans and policies and increased awareness of preparedness issues among the public, private entities, and government agencies (including legislation that addresses preparedness) also serve as key indicators. Participants noted the increased depth and breadth of systems for monitoring situational awareness and the transition from buying "stuff" to establishing preparedness systems.

Participation in external partnerships and collaborations that facilitate communication among multiple entities was a key indicator. The availability of a tiered response system that enables a facility to tap into the resources of the level above it was also an indicator—as was the ability to meet needs *without* relying on the resources of the next tier.

Question 3: How might standards and definitions of healthcare preparedness evolve in order to account for trends and challenges over the next five years?

Participants agreed that preparedness efforts will be informed by a national effort to standardize terminology, identify strategic goals, and develop a national strategy. Several pointed to the need for comprehensive standards that apply to all providers and systems, with particular attention to standards of care for disasters. Participants suggested more coordination and communication among Federal entities. Several underlined the need for standardized, measurable criteria that reflect real improvement. Participants saw the need to define healthcare preparedness and to acknowledge the difficulty of measuring outcomes of preparedness. The integration of preparedness into normal training efforts, the availability of equipment and supplies, and continued, reliable funding would contribute to the sustainability of preparedness.

Summary/Areas of Overlap

Development of coalitions and collaboration are both key elements of success and indicators of preparedness, because they are the basis for developing plans that leverage available resources. Likewise, dedicated and sustainable funding is an important element and an indicator of preparedness because it provides a stable foundation on which to build. Communication facilitates coordination and effective use of resources and therefore is an element that has helped build preparedness programs; the expansion of communication systems to exchange information and share best practices indicates continued focus on strategies to enhance preparedness. Training of staff and volunteers and participation in exercises were seen as significant factors in developing sound response plans. Training and exercises also provide measurable indicators that shed light on an organization's capabilities.

The areas in which standards and definitions may evolve spoke to the same key issues identified as elements and indicators of preparedness. National terminology, goals, strategies, and standards would assist coalitions in planning and pave the way for more collaboration. Engaging more technology solutions, sharing best practices and lessons learned, and ensuring more compatibility and alignment of Federal requirements would all enhance communication and coordination among program awardees. Participants did not appear to seek radical new ways to revise the program but rather sought changes that would enable gradual improvement by expanding on capacities and capabilities.