

August 21, 2008

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Tropical Storm Fay has come and gone. NCH is still standing tall. In fact, we have been proudly "standing" for 51 years, through all kinds of environmental and economic disruptions, serving the community no matter what happens. In light of Fay's departure and the "next big one" we will inevitably face, I thought I'd share a few thoughts about our preparedness for hurricanes as well as any other disaster—natural or manmade.

To stay prepared at NCH, we schedule disaster drills each quarter to cover hurricanes, mass casualties, bioterrorism, and pandemic flu. Some of these exercises are simulations—with "injured" volunteers even applying make-up for added realism. Other exercises are the tabletop variety, where we talk through what actions we would take in certain situations. County and state agencies also participate in our drills, to make them as realistic as possible. Pretend patients come in various conditions. We prepare for surge capacity for both the living and those who won't survive by mobilizing resources and having effective ways to quickly care for all appropriately.

A recent mass-casualty simulation is typical of how seriously we take these exercises. This simulation combined a simulated school kidnapping with an airplane crash. The exercise was staged on a Tuesday morning, with cooperation from the county, school district, other health facilities and law enforcement. We purposely picked Tuesday morning after peak season because we thought it would be quiet. We guessed wrong. The downtown ER that day was inundated with real patients coming by EMS. So we experienced a rush of ambulances with real patients at the same time as a flood of simulated airplane crash victims. It was a real test of our mettle, in which everyone—real and simulated patients, alike—were cared for appropriately. After the exercise, John Brown debriefed everyone.

With our 681 beds, two ERs, 580 physicians, and more than 3,000 clinical and non-clinical colleagues, NCH is the "beacon" in our community, when it comes to handling and caring for patients in a disaster. So we have no choice but to be ready. Accordingly, we are self-contained with our own electrical generators capable of full power with air conditioning for more than seven days on both campuses. We stock up on medicines and food before hurricane season and have potable drinking water to carry us for days. And we continue to refine our systems. Last time we were challenged with a hurricane, uprooted trees disrupted the downtown campuses' water supply. In response, we now have toilets that flush manually, wells on campus, and a significant supply of bottled water.

Importantly, we also are prepared with modest sleeping facilities for our essential personnel who are scheduled to work immediately before or after the storm along with their immediate families should they wish to use them. We are also looking for more comfortable arrangements for future events. Moreover, we even keep NCH Central open for dogs and cats—we can't forget our pets! So while we're continually learning, we feel confident that NCH is ready.

Emergency preparedness is one topic that I'll discuss with Jeff Lytle on his *One on One* TV show this weekend. The show airs on Sunday at Noon on channel 8.

Respectfully,

Allen S. Weiss, M.D.