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APTA RELIEF EFFORTS IN RESPONSE TO FEDERAL AND STATE DISASTERS/EMERGENCIES BOD 11-06-03-02 (Program 01) [Retitled APTA Disaster Response Plan; Amended BOD 02-96-02-04; BOD 03-06-08-13]

It is the intent of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) to assist its members in mobilizing and providing disaster relief and assistance to augment the response efforts of the Federal government, State and local governments, and volunteer relief organizations in protecting public health and safety. The type, magnitude, and location of the disaster will necessarily dictate what resources will be needed and what types of relief efforts will most appropriately meet the needs of the affected population. While there is no way to anticipate what a community's needs will be prior to a disaster or emergency, the creation of a basic response plan will facilitate an expeditious assessment of need and the rapid mobilization of resources. APTA's Board of Directors, national headquarters' staff, and its State Chapters will mobilize resources and coordinate relief activities in the affected area(s).

The first step in disaster response is emergency preparedness. Being prepared can mitigate the impact of a disaster by expediting evacuation, improving survivability, and minimizing the strain on community resources. Physical therapists have the unique skills and knowledge to play an integral role in emergency preparedness, particularly for those with a movement dysfunction or other special needs. Physical therapists can provide assistance to individuals and organizations by assessing their current capabilities and helping prepare emergency response plans. Multiple online resources are also available to assist with emergency preparedness for those who are disabled or have special needs. APTA can assist in this process by developing an emergency response plan information kit to be available in hard copy and on the web for physical therapists, patients/clients and government municipalities, with resources for both instructors and clients.

As part of the disaster response, physical therapists, in some instances, will best be used for their general expertise as health care professionals with a comprehensive understanding of the resources of the local health care delivery system. Physical therapists may also serve a vital function in providing direct services through the existing health care delivery systems in areas such as burn care and wound management and evacuation of individuals who are physically challenged as well as assisting in triage and placement and discharge of patients/clients who are ambulatory with emergent mobility needs following a disaster. Physical therapists may also play a critical role in addressing the broad array of musculoskeletal injuries to which disaster relief workers are exposed, particularly when relief efforts must extend over weeks or months timeframe.

Using existing infrastructure, State Chapters of APTA are best situated to assess the needs of the community and to determine appropriate responses during local and regional emergencies and disasters. State Chapters, therefore, will be at the forefront of response and relief efforts. APTA will coordinate its efforts with Chapter leaders in the areas affected by the emergency or disaster. A Board of Directors Task Force may be established to provide ongoing direction and guidance on the Association's response activities. As appropriate, national fundraising efforts will be coordinated with other organizations or emergency response agencies. If deemed necessary, consideration will also be given to the establishment of a separate fund targeted specifically for meeting the relief needs of APTA components, physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, physical therapy students and physical therapy program faculty residing or working in the affected area(s). The establishment of a fund targeted for physical therapy and the total dollar amount of the donation(s) submitted to relief organization(s)/agency(ies) by APTA shall be approved by APTA's Board of Directors. If such a fund is established by the Board, an application process would be made available to State Chapters to facilitate their determination and description of needs and APTA's delegation of those targeted funds.

The Role of Federal and State Governments in Disaster Relief

A disaster or emergency has the potential to cause significant health and medical problems, including loss of life, human suffering, and injuries and disabilities, and can also result in significant damage to the physical and economic infrastructure of a community. The Federal government has the authority to intervene in disaster and emergency situations pursuant to the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. §5121 et seq.). Under this Act, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has primary authority to conduct response and relief efforts, with assistance from other Federal agencies. The Federal government encourages cash donations during relief and assistance efforts. However, if goods or services are offered, the Federal government will coordinate the distribution of only those donations it accepts for use.

The President may utilize personnel and facilities of the American Red Cross (ARC) and other relief or disaster assistance organizations in the distribution of food, medicine, supplies or other items, and in the restoration, rehabilitation or reconstruction of community services and essential facilities. (42 U.S.C. §5152). For purposes of the Federal response plan, the ARC is deemed to be a Federal agency. The ARC is a private, charitable corporation whose primary functions include the amelioration of human suffering caused by disasters or other catastrophic events. The ARC independently provides "mass care" to disaster victims. Mass care involves coordinated efforts to (a) provide sheltering, feeding and emergency first aid; (b) to operate a disaster welfare information system to collect and report information on the status of victims; and, (c) coordinate bulk distribution of supplies. Under the Federal plan, the ARC is primarily responsible for coordinating these relief efforts with State and local governments, as well as volunteer workers. Volunteer and private sector resources will be used, as available. Thus, it is important that each State Chapter establish contact with volunteer relief organizations within their state to ensure that these entities are aware of APTA members' availability to provide services, including expertise regarding accessibility issues if and when public re-building becomes a part of the restoration or reconstruction plan.

Disaster Conditions

In the event of a Presidential declaration of an emergency or disaster, APTA, at the request of a component and with Board of Directors approval may, initiate appropriate relief response efforts in conjunction with state chapter(s) in the affected area(s). The Stafford Act generally defines a Federal emergency as any occasion or instance for which, in the determination of the President, Federal assistance is needed to supplement State and local efforts and capabilities to save lives and to protect property and public health and safety, or to lessen or avert the threat of a catastrophe. A federal disaster is generally defined as any natural catastrophe (e.g. hurricane, tornado, earthquake, drought) or, regardless of cause, any fire, flood, or explosion which, in the President's determination, causes damage of sufficient severity and magnitude to warrant Federal disaster assistance to augment the resources of State and local governments and disaster relief organizations. (42 U.S.C. §5122).

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