



"We take care of each other in West Virginia"

By Gale Pryor | June 29, 2016

When the rain began on Thursday, June 23, no one in West Virginia knew what was coming next. Ten inches fell overnight into the narrow valleys of the region. Ankle-deep creeks rose 6 feet as flash floods swept away homes tucked among the hollows and hills. Within hours, a state of emergency was declared in 44 of the state's 55 counties.

Clay County, where Community Care of West Virginia operates a clinic, was among the hardest hit. Despite widespread power outages, washed-out roads, and damage to their own property, the leadership and staff of this federally qualified health center began organizing a medical response. In the next 24 hours, CCWV coordinated a plan to ensure that its patients and first responders would be cared for in a once-in-a-century disaster.

CCWV's immediate response provides a roadmap of priorities and actions for FQHCs and other rural healthcare providers when the unimaginable happens.

Get the word out via multiple channels

Chief medical officer Sarah Chouinard's first concern was letting people know that the clinics are open and

that "they can count on us." With power down and roads gone, communication might have been more of a challenge for any other place, but the already strong community rallied.

"In a tiny little town like we're in, where families are extensive and tight knit, in the first three hours after the flood, word spread like wildfire," she says. "Word-of-mouth is a huge asset in a place like ours at a time like this."

CCWV staff used Facebook and signs around town to let people know that water, food, and supplies – as well as medical care – were available at the Clay clinic.

"We fed 85 people in our parking lot on Monday," says Ronni Dittman, CCWV's director of marketing, "and passed out 45 cases of water, 35 gallons of bleach, and 24 bags of cleaning supplies and toiletries – all donations from our staff and others."

Deliver necessary medications

The next step was to vaccinate anyone who came in contact with flood waters against tetanus. Notices on Facebook and wherever people gathered let the

community know that CCWV was providing free tetanus shots. Delivering 350 shots in just four days, the clinic plans to continue to re-order supplies as long as there is a demand.

Then the staff began running reports through their electronic health records, determining which of their patients had been prescribed insulin or the blood thinner Coumadin – critical medications for chronic conditions.

“We want to know who had failed to pick up a refill or might be about to run out,” says Chouinard. Throughout the week and as long as needed, CCWV plans to deliver those prescriptions to patients who can’t get out of their homes or are too overwhelmed to come to the clinic.

If patients are located in still inaccessible areas, the staff will ask the National Guard for help delivering medications, says Chouinard, “but we’re going to try to do this on our own.”

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Coordinate with other local organizations

Much of CCWV’s response has been led by April Taylor, a public health nurse employed part-time by CCWV and full-time by the local department of health. As the communications link between the two organizations, Taylor is arranging distribution of tetanus vaccines and other vital shared services. CCWV is also working with the volunteer fire department and the local high school to distribute supplies and donations while all medical care is driven to their clinics.

CCWV already has long working relationships with both the fire department and the schools, which have facilitated coordination during an emergency. Taylor’s advice to other rural healthcare organizations preparing for the possibility of disaster: “If they don’t have that relationship with the local health department, develop it. If they don’t with the fire department or high school or other volunteer organizations, develop it.”

Prepare for the months ahead

While CCWV deals with immediate needs in the first days after the flood, leaders are keeping their eyes on what is still to come.

“My concern is a month from now,” says Chouinard. “Right now there is an outpouring of support. But 100 homes were destroyed in Clay County alone. We don’t know what will become of those families.”

Building connections with Habitat for Humanity and other mission-minded organizations over the long term is next on the organization’s agenda. And Chouinard takes solace in the way the community has rallied since the flood.

“I pulled into the volunteer fire department this morning and watched people shirtless, in flip-flops and covered in mud, hauling water into the building to store for other people in their community,” says Chouinard.

“We take care of each other in West Virginia.”

To learn more about donating funds and supplies to CCWV, contact COO Brock Malcolm: info@ccwv.org.



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