EMS Workers, Law, and Public Health Systems

This document provides information about the role of EMS workers within the public health system and during governmentally-declared public health emergencies.

Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Workers
EMS workers primarily provide emergency care before individuals reach a hospital setting. They have a range of responsibilities, which may include triage, treating patients, transporting equipment or individuals, and handling hazardous substances.

The broad description “EMS workers” includes several categories of pre-hospital emergency medical personnel (e.g., emergency medical technicians (EMTs), paramedics). Every state requires EMTs and paramedics to complete a training program and pass a subsequent licensure examination. The National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) is the national certification organization for EMS workers. Approximately 270,000 EMS workers are currently certified by NREMT.

EMS Workers and the Public Health System
The Institute of Medicine has described the public health emergency preparedness system (PHEPS) as follows: federal, state, and local governmental public health organizations are at its hub, with spokes formed by health care delivery systems, communities, academic institutions, media, businesses, and homeland security and public safety agencies.

As pre-hospital emergency care providers, EMS workers interface with several parts of the PHEPS. They most often fit within the health care delivery system and public safety spokes. Also, because EMS workers often act in conjunction with public health workers, they additionally fall within the hub composed of governmental public health organizations.

Emergencies, Public Health Emergencies, and EMS Response
The federal government and approximately half of the states distinguish legally between emergencies and public health emergencies. Distinct processes exist within the states and federal government for declaring these two types of emergencies. While emergency or disaster declarations tend to concern damage to property or the physical environment, public health emergencies focus on the health-related aspects of an emergency (e.g., minimizing disease transmission during a novel infectious disease outbreak; temporarily expanding the health care workforce in the aftermath of a major hurricane).

EMS workers’ skill sets are critical during emergencies and public health emergencies. For example, when Hurricane Isaac was approaching Louisiana in 2012, that state’s governor issued an executive order declaring a public health emergency and temporarily suspending licensure requirements for EMTs. By allowing licensed EMTs from out-of-state to provide care in Louisiana, the governor ensured that the state would have enough EMTs to address the needs of individuals affected by the hurricane.

Additional Information
For additional information about EMS workers, law, and public health systems, click here.

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