



MORE HURRICANES: David Weber, RN, (photo right) cleans a cut for a patient in a clinic in New Orleans that the Virginia-1 Disaster Medical Assistance Team manned. VA-1 DMAT is seeking nurse volunteers willing to brave disaster areas which have sustained damage, as seen in center photo.

When Winds Blow

A landmark year for hurricanes requires expansion of healthcare disaster management **BY SANDY KEEFE, MSN, RN**

FROM ANY PERSPECTIVE, 2005 has been a landmark year for natural disasters, marking the first time in history the World Meteorological Organization has had to use the Greek alphabet to name hurricanes battering the Western hemisphere.

For the Virginia-1 Disaster Medical Assistance Team (VA-1 DMAT), these catastrophes have resulted in a series of deployments. "We went to the Mississippi Gulf region after Hurricane Katrina, the Florida Keys for Rita, and we're on our way to New Orleans now," said Jeff Hamilton, administrative officer with VA-1 DMAT and president of Aeromedical Transport Specialists Inc (ATS) in Manassas, VA. DMATs are part of the National Disaster Medical System/Federal Emergency Management Agency (NDMS/FEMA), an agency within the Department of Homeland Security.

A DMAT is a group of professional and paraprofessional medical personnel, supported by logistical and administrative staff, designated to provide emergency medical care during a disaster or other mission. In order to become a DMAT, a group needs to identify a sponsor, establish a point of contact and sign an agreement with NDMS.

The VA-1 DMAT has completed these steps, and is in the process of recruiting nurses, paramedics, nurse practitioners, physicians, physician assistants, respiratory therapists and pharmacists to expand their team

Becoming a DMAT Nurse

Karen Hamilton, RN,C, CEN, CCRN, CFRN, MICN, PCCN, NREMT-P, CCEMT-P, Jeff's wife and chief flight nurse for ATS, plays an active role in VA-1 DMAT as a supervisory nurse specialist. "We're currently looking for nurses with critical care and/or ED backgrounds



who are ACLS-certified, and who have taken a trauma or pediatric course," she said. "We'll be at the state EMS symposium in 2 weeks to recruit nurses and paramedics. We advertise on the EMS Web site, get some of our staff by word of mouth, and receive lots of state and local government support.

"We want a minimum of 3 years experience, and prefer some disaster experience," Karen Hamilton added. Nurses need to complete approximately 30 hours of online training before being deployed, and then advanced training takes about another 50 hours.

"Nurses really have to be committed to DMAT and they have to be extremely flexi-

ble," said Hamilton. "There's a lot of unknown. One minute you're unpacking boxes and the next you may be working a cardiac arrest!"

Additionally, nurses need a letter of support from their primary employer to become a DMAT nurse. "After that, the hospital is basically obligated to release the nurse for a DMAT deployment, similar to releasing someone for military duty," said Hamilton.

DMAT Levels

Each deployment team consists of 35 members, and the goal is to recruit enough members to staff a full team for deployment. "There are four levels of DMAT, and we've gone from level 4 to level 3 in 18 months, which is impressive," said Hamilton. "We've built our team up to around 90 members, and need to fill the rest of our positions to about 140 members. Then we can move up to level 2 from there."

Once VA-1 DMAT is designated as level 2, there are distinct advantages. "We'll get equipment, supply and pharmacy caches from NDMS/FEMA, so we can set up field hospitals similar to what you see on the old M.A.S.H. shows," said Hamilton.

DMAT Deployment

Once the DMAT is deployed, medical and nursing personnel are involved in triage and treatment similar to what happens in hospital EDs. "We do I and Ds (incision and drainage), suture lacerations, manage medical cases, insert chest tubes, and anything else that needs to be done," said Karen Hamilton. "In addition to serving in regional and national disasters, we're a supplement to the military in response to military casualties, and could be deployed to Iraq or other war zones."

While there are 60 DMATs across the country, VA-1 DMAT is the only one in Virginia. Once DMAT members are deployed, they become employees of NDMS/FEMA. "You get paid for a minimum of 12 hours a day, even when you're on standby," said Hamilton. "And of course all meals and travel are covered, along with a per diem."

Nurses interested in joining the VA-1 DMAT can find more information online at <http://www.tidewater.vaems.org/dmat/default.htm>. ■

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