

January 22, 2004

The Disaster Medical Assistance Teams are dedicated to our National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) and are committed to working with FEMA/DHS to continue to improve and enhance emergency preparedness and response. However, at this time, we feel that our hands are tied due to the many gaps in the system that lie well above the level of NDMS and the teams. There are no mechanisms in place to allow input from the teams, and further, no means to properly meet rapidly evolving criteria. It is not clear that senior leadership at FEMA and DHS are aware of the profound and ongoing problems in the transition of NDMS to FEMA under DHS. In part, there has been a lack of responsiveness to communications from team Commanders and the new federal leadership in Washington. Of the highest importance is the fact that NDMS leadership has not been given the authority or mechanisms to resolve the current system issues under FEMA that are fundamental to disaster medical readiness and response on the teams' behalf.

A recent FEMA policy decision regarding re-categorization of NDMS DMAT Teams exemplifies several of these issues. It is the consensus contention of the teams that the current mechanisms of assessment and policy implementation have serious flaws and deserve immediate review by an impartial oversight mechanism. In the most recent case, teams were retrospectively assessed by new readiness criteria of which the teams were never provided notification nor allowed input or timeline to achieve prior to implementation. The new criteria are in direct conflict with both verbal and signed performance agreements in place during the time period reviewed. Further, there is concern that the process was led by a part time contractor with potential conflict of interest. An effort presented as a planning tool was instead translated directly to policy. It is the teams' contention that this was not a valid process. Teams welcome objective criteria and welcome parallel support needed to more rapidly and effectively mobilize and operate. However, to set criteria without notice, input, time to comply, nor most importantly systems in place at the FEMA level to accomplish them is not a reflection of appropriate management, leadership and process.

Instead of solving identified system problems and accepting accountability for the system's obstacles to team readiness, FEMA has penalized and demoted teams in a process that is flawed and invalid. Such key system problems include, but are not limited to, a lack of personnel system in place for rostering personnel, issuance of equipment promised and required in the basic load, authority for teams to use computers issued to them, authority of teams to access their own personnel database, corrections of problems with the third party payor system handling our workplans, and lack of promised letter to employers and support when employers decline to release personnel for required training, alerts or deployments.

Teams were repeatedly assured that they would be notified of changes in requirements and that no new criteria would become requirements until system issues were solved. Teams have repeatedly been told to be patient with the transition and that all teams would be fully supported to maintain and improve their operational status. At the same time, the recent recategorization assessment and policy were being planned and implemented. During this same time, team working groups that existed to provide formal input to NDMS/FEMA were disbanded and continue even now not to have been re-configured transparently nor been authorized to meet. Assessment was performed

despite an acknowledged lack of written records and teams were never contacted directly for confirmation of data. Assessments were based in part upon assessment tools that teams were assured were not designed for, nor would ever be used to penalize any team, but only as part of a future goal setting process. Assessment was performed by a part-time contractor with potential conflict of interest in the outcome of such an assessment. This invalid assessment was directly translated into sweeping national federal policy without proper input from the chain of command it affected or from those by whom it would be directly implemented. There was no written explanation for the basis for each team's re-categorization, no mechanism for correction of errors and no mechanism for appeal. The policy was imposed and teams demoted from eligibility for their scheduled monthly rotations before any teams were even notified the new policy or criteria existed.

When open discussion on the re-categorization policy was requested on scheduled alert and non-alert team commander conference calls, it was refused. Teams united to formally request that scheduling be accomplished promptly and with FEMA leadership to include at least Eric Tolbert and Michael Lowder to personally hear our concerns. Copies of that request were also sent to Mr. Tolbert and Mr. Lowder directly. The call was to be scheduled by NDMS/FEMA with date/time appropriate to accommodate Mr. Tolbert and Mr. Lowder's schedules to attend. They still did not attend or call into the meeting remotely, nor have they responded to these valid concerns.

Particularly since the transition, the readiness and response of NDMS teams has not been recognized. When formal report on the 2001 Anthrax Response went to Congress, the key efforts of NDMS DMAT Teams in that mission was not mentioned. When the formal report on the World Trade Center attacks went to Congress, on-site medical care of rescue and recovery workers at ground zero and intensive burn care of victims by NDMS DMAT teams also was not acknowledged. The NDMS International Medical Surgical Response Team-East, which is an NDMS team and component of the Massachusetts DMAT, received recognition for their recent response to the Iran earthquake, but only as a FEMA team with no emphasis on their DMAT or NDMS status. The identity of NDMS is rapidly being lost within FEMA. NDMS has a unique disaster healthcare mission and set of vital resources that are not being properly supported or understood. Although teams were assured the Office of Emergency Response would remain intact under DHS, it has been abolished. Although we were assured NDMS would remain intact, it has been fragmented and relegated to a section role in operations with no effective day-to-day status to accomplish fundamental readiness requirements. Although we were assured that there would be ongoing medical representation at the highest levels within FEMA/DHS organizational leadership, this has not occurred.

Although teams were assured that databases at NDMS/FEMA including their personnel's personal information including social security numbers was secure, this same personal information was simultaneously and knowingly sent out by NDMS/FEMA as insecure internet attachments, clearly in violation of standing NDMS policy. At times these databases were actually directly sent to the wrong recipient. Worse, alerted teams were instructed to repeatedly send subsets of the same information back through the same insecure manner or be stood down. Follow up on this issue was requested and promised, and is still not forthcoming. Although again promised to the teams at the annual conference in March, after transition to DHS, no face to face meetings between all Team Commanders with FEMA or DHS ever occurred in 2003 despite repeated requests and assurances. Recently Team Commanders arranged time off work and

made reservations in November, 2003 with assurance of activation status for such a meeting to be held January 7-8, 2004 by Eric Tolbert. Travel was promised, but never approved, activation never occurred, and finally the meeting was cancelled on short notice. It has not been rescheduled to date despite repeated requests.

This is neither a way to professionally and respectfully work to share information nor to work collaboratively to achieve ever increasing readiness needs and response status for which the Dept. of Homeland Security was formed. As we write this letter, multiple DMAT teams are on alert or activated today, rostered and loaded, ready to respond rapidly wherever our nation needs them. The Orange Alert level has not decreased for us. The teams and NDMS deserve support and the ability to solve these issues. It is the process that has broken down, not the teams and not the commitment of our teams to excellence and readiness to serve our country. We respectfully request the Emergency Preparedness and Response Subcommittee review the process itself by which FEMA recently assessed and implemented a policy of recategorization of DMAT teams. It is yet one example of a much broader problem. We also ask that the Department of Homeland Security Oversight Committee at large be made aware of the genuine concern voiced by an overwhelming consensus of DMAT teams about fundamental process issues and unresolved mechanisms for maintaining our response readiness in the transition of NDMS to FEMA under DHS. United we stand.

Sincerely,

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