



CASE STUDY

Our customer's viewpoint

Summary

Health Care System

Ventura County Health Care Agency

Size

Ventura County Medical Center is a 223-bed general acute care hospital and Level II Trauma Center. Santa Paula Hospital is a 49-bed general acute care hospital. The VCMC system has 30 outpatient clinics located geographically.

Challenges

As the main medical facility for Ventura County, VCMC – and the county and supply partners – had to prepare and respond to the Thomas fire (at the time, the largest wildfire in California history), so it could continue delivering essential medical and surgical services to the county's residents.

Solutions

- » Developed emergency action plans in conjunction with county EMS partners and broader public health organizations
- » Conducted mock drills
- » Set up incident command center in conjunction with local EMS
- » Enacted disaster management plan with all internal and external team members
- » Collaborated with primary supply partner Medline to ensure VCMC and Santa Paula Hospital had the critical supplies needed and stock up on additional emergency supplies if needed

Results (during the 5-day crisis)

- » Hospital stayed open. No patients, staff or family members were injured or impaired by the fire but residents will be impacted for years to come
- » Medline assisted with temporary county shelters in conjunction with Ventura County Health Care Agency
- » Maintained required par levels of critical supplies. Never ran out of masks despite heavy usage

Outstanding preparation helps Ventura County Health Care Agency deliver uninterrupted care during Thomas fires.

Matt Sandoval

Chief Deputy Director
Ventura County Health Care Agency, Ventura, California



Our Health System

Ventura County Health Care Agency is a fully-integrated, comprehensive system of hospital, clinic and specialty services. The system provides access to high quality, compassionate healthcare to residents throughout Ventura County.

While Ventura County Medical Center provides access to health care to all residents, special emphasis is placed on providing access to care for the underserved and those facing barriers to access. VCMC is the designated Level II Trauma Center for Ventura County.

Our health system also includes Santa Paula Hospital, an acute, 49 bed full-service community hospital providing care to Santa Clara Valley residents. Santa Paula Hospital offers a comprehensive list of inpatient and outpatient services and full-service departments for diagnostic procedure, treatment, aftercare and ongoing care.

Our Challenge

On December 4, 2017, the Thomas fire began in southern California near Santa Paula in the foothills above Thomas Aquinas College. In the early hours of December 5, fueled by 50 mph winds, the fire spread throughout Ventura County and made its way toward VCMC and Santa Paula Hospital.

Within a few hours, we switched our power to backup generators because the county's power grid was impacted by the fire. We would rely on the generators for the next four days.

The Thomas fire would eventually become one of the largest wildfires in California's modern history, burning 281,893 acres, of which 181,333 were on Los Padres National Forest. More than 1,000 structures were lost in the fire before it was fully contained on January 12.

“To ensure we’re ready to go at a moment’s notice, we have a VCMC preparedness committee, consisting of several hospital leaders and department heads...”

As the main medical facility and level II trauma center for Ventura County, VCMC – and our county and supply partners – had to prepare and respond to the fire, so we could continue delivering essential medical and surgical services to the county’s residents.

Although the fire did not impact us as much as some other areas of Ventura County, we did employ our emergency management plans. In the process, we learned some very valuable lessons we can incorporate for future crises situations.

The Solutions

Incident Command Center

As the primary healthcare provider in Ventura County, we’re committed to serving the needs of our residents in time of crisis.

To ensure we’re ready to go at a moment’s notice, we have a VCMC preparedness committee, consisting of several hospital leaders and department heads, including the emergency department since that is the focal point for most disasters – at least at the beginning. The committee has developed emergency action plans covering a number of potential disasters, including fire, earthquake, mudslides, torrential rains and active shooter.

A key part of each emergency action plan is setting up an Incident Command Center at the outset of the emergency. The center is managed by an Incident Commander and assisted by other leaders. This group assigns the disaster preparedness leaders and oversees logistics, operations, supplies, as well as public information.

We follow the Joint Commission and the state of California’s regulations to conduct at least two mock drills per year to simulate disasters and run through each person’s responsibility throughout the entire span of the event. The Incident Command Center teams can change depending on what is needed for patients and staff.

We also are a member of the county-wide disaster prep committee that is part of the larger public health umbrella that implements and coordinates disaster plans. Key members of this committee include our county EMS partners such as the fire, police and sheriff departments and other area community hospitals and long-term care facilities. Our primary medical products suppliers, such as Medline, also play a critical role in our emergency preparedness plans.

Implementing the crisis plan

On December 5 at about 1 a.m., it was time to put our crisis plan into action. We began by setting up our Incident Command Center with myself as the Incident Commander at VCMC. From about 3-6 a.m., the majority of the hospital leadership arrived and their first step was to fill the roles of the Incident Command Center to ensure the crisis plan could be implemented properly.

At 6 a.m. we started contacting outside agencies like the county fire and sheriff departments and emergency services, which had set up their own command centers. We also contacted our prime vendor Medline to make sure they were on call if we needed additional emergency supplies or if we needed to stock up

on supplies in case the fire impeded access to the hospital.

Medline has a comprehensive Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan in place to respond to a wide range of disasters, including five specific scenarios that could take place at our hospital. In advance of emergencies, we work with Medline to finalize our plans for each scenario so we know what Medline will enact once a disaster strikes.

Medline’s inventory management system offer the highest service levels in the healthcare industry and gives us confidence that we will get the products we need when we need them. In the event of a disaster, Medline’s inventory management system can be used to redirect any portion of more than \$1.8 billion of their inventory into a targeted geographic area. For our hospital system in southern California, Medline’s distribution centers in Tolleson, AZ; Aurora, CO; Salt Lake City, UT; and Temecula, CA; combined with the Rialto, CA and Tracy, CA distribution centers (two of Medline’s largest central stocking locations or “Hubs”), offer a logistical advantage in times of crisis. As situations occur, inventory is immediately re-directed to the areas with the most critical need.

With an encroaching fire, Medline enacted its respiratory disaster plan, which included a formulary of critical products such as face masks ready to be put on trucks bound for our hospital at a moment’s notice. Medline made sure our fill rate was 100% on all the formulary supplies.

We initiated our internal call-tree system in which managers called their direct reports to learn of their situation, ensure their safety and gauge their availability to work. Making matters worse, the power had gone out in many areas, which meant land phone lines and even many cell phones were out, so not everyone could be reached right away.

Ensuring the safety of patients and employees

Many of our employees were being evacuated from their homes and neighborhoods, and some even had their homes destroyed by the fire. We felt it was our job to ensure they were safe and help them where we could.

As the fire appeared to move closer to VCMC and Santa Paula Hospital, leadership assessed the danger and talked with local agencies and partners to determine our needs and next steps. Our first priority was protecting our patients and staff. We checked in on all the patients to see how they were doing and if smoke was getting in the rooms. Some patient rooms and windows face the mountains, which is where the fire began. Thankfully everyone was okay and there was no smoke on the patient floors.

The Incident Command Center staff met every hour to remain apprised of the fire's progression, to assess the situation and to conduct check-ins of every patient room. On the first night of the fire, the staff also worked on a plan to transfer our most acute patients out of the hospital and to a nearby facility, as a precaution.

Fortunately as the next day progressed, the fire moved away from the hospital, so the odds of us



having to evacuate staff and patients were significantly diminished.

But for our sister hospital, Santa Paula, a 49-bed facility about 12 miles northeast of VCMC, the fire was getting dangerously close and we were contemplating evacuating the patients. We contacted the emergency agencies in the county and our EMS director at Santa Paula to discuss the situation. We determined that sheltering in place was a better choice than transferring the 40-plus patients and staff to our hospital in Ventura because there is only one road leading out of Santa Paula Hospital, which could be blocked with emergency vehicles. And more cars on the road could cause further gridlock if we tried to evacuate.

However, another facility, a county psychiatric facility, did reach out to our CEO about VCMC taking some of their patients because their psychiatric facility was in the path of the fire. Fortunately, we had the capacity to accept the patients, but the patients ultimately were diverted to the Ventura County Fairgrounds.

Supplies arrive despite conditions

State law requires us to maintain an emergency stock of critical products to ensure patient care remains paramount through all types of disasters. During the worst part of the fire, which lasted about five days, we maintained our required par levels and were never in danger of running out of supplies – with one exception, face masks.

While the flames were a safe distance from our facility, the smoke was entering the building and the odor was growing more intense. We disengaged the automatic doors to the entrance of the hospital in an effort to limit the smoke drifting into the lobby. The air stayed relatively clear for the patient units. But as the morning wore on and the smoke intensified on the first floor, including the ED, we began giving masks to anyone who entered the building, including patients, staff and visitors.

Clinicians were going through at least three to five masks per shift and we were getting additional requests from county officials. And even though

“During the crisis period of about five days, we maintained our required par levels and were never in danger of running out of supplies – with one exception, face masks.”

“ Although the smoke and high number of emergency vehicles made the roads to and from the hospital almost impassable, Medline’s trucks got through somehow, and by mid-afternoon they delivered not only their own products but parcels from FedEx and other delivery companies. ”

we had extra stock because it was coincidentally flu season, we had to dip into our emergency stock and we started running out.

As the day progressed, we started getting requests for masks from other county agency departments like Public Health and Behavioral Health and we did our best to comply.

That morning, our CEO personally called our Medline sales rep to order more masks, air purifiers and other critical supplies. Although the smoke and high number of emergency vehicles made the roads to and from the hospital almost impassable, Medline’s trucks got through somehow, and by mid-afternoon they delivered not only their own products but parcels from FedEx and other delivery companies.

Because we were on backup generators, we stopped all elective surgeries and only did the emergencies, which also kept our supply usage down.

Recovery

As the fire died down, Ventura County set up temporary shelters and recovery centers at the nearby fairgrounds to help provide care to victims of the fire. Once we had our situation under control, we sent staff members to the centers to lend assistance, as well as to provide face masks and other critical supplies Medline had delivered.

Our Medline rep not only ensured our hospitals had everything we needed, she went above and beyond and

called on local evacuation shelters and Red Cross centers to see what they needed and what Medline could do.

For VCMC, we were lucky to have averted any physical damage except for the pungent smoke odor. On December 10, after the fifth day of the fire, we resumed business as usual. Power came back on and we started functioning as normal.

We continue to help with recovery efforts on behalf of the county in Behavioral Health and Public Health aspects. Exposure to the smoke will impact our residents for years to come with respiratory illnesses and we will be ready to care for them and all of our residents.

Lessons learned

In the aftermath, we worked with community partners, agencies and suppliers to conduct a debrief and review what we did and how to improve upon our response for when

the next disaster hits. Some areas we identified for improvement include:

- » **Enhancing internal communications**, specifically keeping our staff contact list updated. For several team members, our phone numbers were not current and we could not reach everyone in a timely manner.
- » **Improving night staff training** – Most of our drills took place during the day and little if any training was provided for the late shift. So, when the fire broke out late at night and in the early hours of the morning, we were not as prepared as we should have been. Going forward, we will provide adequate disaster prep training to team members on all shifts.
- » **Managing disaster in two areas** – VCMC and Santa Paula. We were managing both hospitals from our VCMC Incident Command Center and in retrospect we should have



had two command centers. Santa Paula had different issues than Ventura County and the leaders on the ground in Santa Paula would have been better equipped to assess their situation, develop solutions, and call on the resources they needed.

- » **The importance of great relationships with vendors who have a can-do attitude and the ability to flex their operations in emergency scenarios.** When the roads reopened, Medline and other vendors were there immediately to help re-stock our facility with every medical supply we needed. Medline wasn't waiting for us to ask for help. They were reaching out proactively, asking us what they could do. It was a great collaboration in a very stressful time. Even though Medline serviced multiple customers impacted by the Thomas Fire, we felt they were proactive and operationally flexible to meet our changing needs.

Practice ensured great response

One of the hardest things about dealing with the fire was that we didn't know what direction the wind would take it. As in most disasters, it was very unpredictable. But whatever path it took, we felt ready. The preparation, drills and simulations we conducted with our staff, key suppliers and community partners over the last many months gave us the confidence to perform – to organize, make quick decisions, coordinate and implement the plans we had in place – under the most stressful of circumstances. While we don't wish anything bad to occur to our hospital system or community in the future, history has shown that unforeseen events happen. When a disaster hits, no matter what it is, we'll be prepared even better than before.

About the author

Matthew Sandoval is the Chief Deputy Director for Ventura County Health Care Agency. He is second in command for the 2,700 employees that serve the Ventura County Medical System, Behavioral Health Department, Public Health Department, Medical Examiner's Office, Animal Services and the Ventura County Health Care Plan. He joined Ventura County in 2017 with previous experience in hospital quality and regulatory issues. He received his Master's in Health Administration from the University of Southern California.



Medline Industries, Inc. Three Lakes Drive, Northfield, IL 60093

FOLLOW US    

Medline United States
1-800-MEDLINE (633-5463)
medline.com | info@medline.com

Medline Canada
1-800-396-6996
medline.ca | canada@medline.com

Medline México
01-800-831-0898
medlinemexico.com | mexico@medline.com