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State law allows medical help across state lines**KY. NURSE UNABLE TO AID AFTER KATRINA**

By Jim Warren

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Kentucky recently became the first state in the nation to adopt model legislation making it easier for doctors, nurses and other volunteer health care workers to cross state lines and offer assistance in major disasters or other emergencies.

And the process might have started in part because a registered nurse from southeastern Kentucky found that he couldn't offer medical help on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 because the state of Mississippi didn't recognize his Kentucky nursing license.

"They said that just because I was qualified in Kentucky, it didn't mean I was qualified in Mississippi," said Robert Edinger, 58, an RN who practices at the Pineville Hospital in Bell County. "So, I couldn't do anything in the nursing profession down there. I couldn't even give somebody a tetanus shot."

When a frustrated Edinger got back home, he called Pineville attorney Stephen Cawood and complained about the situation. It turned out that Cawood is Kentucky's representative on the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws, a 115-year-old, non-profit organization that drafts model or uniform laws for consideration by state legislatures. Cawood notified conference officials about the problem Edinger described, and the organization began looking into the problem.

Other doctors, nurses and health professionals from other states ran into the same problem Edinger experienced in trying to get permission to practice in areas affected by Katrina. In short order, the conference drafted a "Uniform Emergency Volunteer Health Practitioners Act" intended to solve the problem by allowing medical professionals to cross state lines in declared emergencies without getting tangled in red tape. The Kentucky General Assembly passed the measure earlier this month, and Gov. Ernie Fletcher signed it into law on March 23. The model act has been introduced in the legislatures of at least six other states.

According to Cawood, the conference on uniform state laws usually takes three years or more to draft model legislation. But the perceived need was so great in this case that the process was accelerated and completed within a year, he said.

"The act had whole-hearted endorsement from the leadership of the conference, and there was real support for it all over the country," Cawood said. "It really has wonderful implications for these kinds of disasters in the future. If we had, say, an earthquake in Paducah, health care workers from other states could come here and bring their credentials, and they would be accepted to go to work."

According to a prepared statement from the conference on uniform state laws, the model legislation establishes a system in which health practitioners can register to provide volunteer services either in advance or during declared emergencies. It also authorizes hospitals or other facilities to use out-of-state professionals in emergencies and rely on the registration system to confirm that the professionals are properly licensed.

Dr. William Hacker, commissioner of the Kentucky Department for Public Health, said the model will provide benefits if Kentucky is ever hit by a major natural disaster, or even a terrorist attack. In effect, Kentucky would have a database of health providers from other states that it could call upon quickly for help, he said.

"It's to the advantage of states to have this in place to make it easier to be a receiver of volunteers," Hacker said.

Meanwhile, Cawood gives Robert Edinger credit for helping to get the ball rolling.

"It just seemed like a little common sense was needed," Edinger said.

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