



States seek to cut disaster red tape

By Mimi Hall, USA TODAY
October 9, 2007

Laws aimed at breaking legal hurdles that prevented hundreds of doctors and nurses from volunteering to help Hurricane Katrina victims in 2005 are gaining momentum in states from Oregon to Pennsylvania. The legislation would allow doctors, nurses, pharmacists, coroners, emergency medical technicians and veterinarians who aren't licensed in states struck by disaster to get quick authorization to offer medical help.

Laws have been approved in Colorado, Kentucky and Tennessee and are awaiting the governor's signature in California. Proponents say they expect 20 more states to consider legislation in 2008.

Interest stems from the confusion and government red tape that kept volunteer health workers out of New Orleans when flooding wiped out hospitals and left residents desperate for medical care.

At the city's Superdome shelter, Juliette Saussy and a handful of doctors struggled to provide basic care with few supplies and very little help. "We found out later that there were hundreds, if not thousands, of volunteers that were stopped (80 miles away) in Baton Rouge and were not allowed to come into the city and help" because of questions about credentialing and liability, says Saussy, emergency medical services chief for New Orleans.

Two years later, Saussy says, "It gives me goose bumps, it makes me so angry."

Health care workers wanting to help in disasters would have to register with the government. Once approved, they would be under the supervision of officials in the state where they volunteer.

Using the registries, officials in disaster zones could check to verify that volunteer health workers are properly credentialed and insured. The legislation grants states and practitioners protection from lawsuits.

The National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws, group that drafts model laws for legislatures, came up with the proposal last year.

In a disaster, officials coping with problems from lack of phone service and impassable roads shouldn't be expected to deal with the complex legal and medical issues involved in allowing doctors to practice across state lines, says Raymond Pepe, a member of the commission.

In Louisiana, "in the fog of war, so to speak, people didn't know what the rules were," Pepe says.

It was a source of frustration for those who wanted to help. Preston "Chip" Rich, chief of trauma surgery at the University of North Carolina Hospitals, headed to New Orleans shortly after Katrina hit in a 35-car convoy of 100-plus health care workers — but the group never got across the Louisiana line.

State officials wouldn't let them come in and start practicing.

"It was just a brick wall" of bureaucracy, Rich says. "It was chaos."