

Preparing for Delaware's Emergency Management Needs

My first semester as a Research Assistant for the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration (IPA) involved working off-campus with the Delaware Division of Public Health's Disaster Preparedness Section. This gave me experience with projects on which I never imagined I would be working, including *Operation Hotwire*, a medical evacuation I helped facilitate as part of the Division's disaster-preparedness exercises. With others in my section, I worked with employees from two state long-term-care facilities, the Delaware City Fire Company, and the New Castle County Emergency Operations Center. This exercise was designed to test the availability of resources and the comprehensiveness of the facilities' disaster plans.

As a team, we role-played an evacuation of 84 volunteer "patients," who each represented an actual resident of the Governor Bacon Health Center. The patients wore tags advising team members of their physical conditions so that they could be taken into account in maintaining care and security during the evacuation. For instance, more than half of the facility's residents suffer from a dementia-causing illness, which presents a myriad of risks (e.g., wandering).

In an attempt to engage a vital audience, we recruited most of the volunteers from nursing education programs. In this way, they could have an inside look at what their roles would be during a disaster. We hope to continue this symbiotic partnership for future exercises. The staff nurses and fire company worked to carry all of the volunteers out of the building with special evacuation chairs and transported them via medically equipped vehicles to another long-term facility. The staff at the receiving facility role-played their response ability for a surge of patients. This exercise provided all agencies with a chance to identify strengths and areas to improve, as we continue to develop more sophisticated and comprehensive disaster response.

Based on observation, feedback, and analysis, I wrote an After Action Report in the format required by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). I included an addendum explaining the best practice methods to identify and safeguard the special needs of the population afflicted by Alzheimer's Disease and other dementia-causing illnesses.

It was incredibly rewarding to draw on the practical knowledge and skills I've learned as an IPA Research Assistant and Master of Public Administration student to champion a cause that came to personally compel me through my prior AmeriCorps service with the Alzheimer's Association. My IPA Research Assistantship with the Division of Public Health's Disaster Preparedness Section has reinforced my desire to become a public servant, giving me a clear example of how hard work in public administration can make a real difference in community health and safety.

—by Danielle Reeves