

REQUEST:

Study and assess the state's preparedness for public health threats and emergencies including responding to natural disasters and highly infectious diseases. Review current protocols and examine public health resources to determine if they are sufficient. Identify weaknesses within the public health response framework and make recommendations for improvement.

RESPONSE:

We have divided our response into two sections. The first discusses the State's emergency and disaster preparedness structure and lists sources for further, more in-depth, information. In the second section, we discuss weaknesses that have been observed in the State's preparedness plans and, again provide sources that go into more depth about the weaknesses and provide some recommendations for improvement.

The State's primary roles in disaster preparedness and response are to maintain overall situational awareness and to support community responses. Those working for the State in these roles are charged with providing guidance to local jurisdictions, and coordinating securing and deploying federal and other resources, if available, when state and local assets are insufficient to meet the need. The Texas Department of Public Safety (TXDPS) is the State agency charged with overseeing disaster planning and response. Within the TXDPS is the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM; <http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/dem/>). The Department of State Health Services (DSHS) serves as the primary agency for emergency support functions related to Public Health and Medical Services and is responsible for coordinating the public health and medical response during emergency situations.

Through the TDEM, the State provides an extensive list of publications related to emergency response (<http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/dem/downloadableforms.htm#stateplan>). Of particular interest for this request is the State Emergency Management Plan and Annexes section, listed third from the bottom in the Index. DSHS is the agency designated to respond to incidents related to Annex D (Radiological Emergency Management) and Annex H (Health and Medical Services). Annex H contains important appendices related to mass fatality management, behavioral health during disasters, biological terrorism, pandemic influenza, and medical countermeasures. The plans provided are detailed and organized into operational strategies.

Every year, the State of Texas holds an emergency management conference, during which presenters and attendees review and discuss current emergency management protocols, including lessons learned and proposed next steps based on responses to recent disasters. Data and presentation from the 2015 conference held in San Antonio, Texas, is available from the TXDPS (<https://www.preparingtexas.org/preparedness.aspx?page=b22b53b4-f824-45fa-a884-a7eda0a16241>). The next Texas Emergency Management Conference will be held in Austin, Texas, between April 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016 (<https://www.preparingtexas.org/index.aspx?>).

Many of the documents available from the 2015 conference discuss, in detail, how responses could have been improved and how resources could have been better allocated. We reviewed publications from the list and selected key works that we believe best discuss the current strengths and weaknesses of recent public health responses to natural disasters and man-made emergencies. These are highlighted in Appendix A (attached to the TMC72 response), with links to relevant works regarding these issues.

A number of national organizations study and analyze how states plan and respond to disasters. In the *Ready or Not? Protecting the Public from Diseases, Disasters, and Bioterrorism* report by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, last produced in 2012, Texas received a score of five (5) out of a possible ten (10) for public health preparedness. The report authors felt that Texas' plans and responses had six significant weaknesses and provided the following general recommendations to improve preparedness:

- Assure sufficient, dedicated funds for public health preparedness to ensure basic capabilities to respond to threats public health departments face every day and also to have the trained experts and systems in place to act quickly in the face of major, unexpected emergencies
- Provide ongoing support to communities so they better cope and recover from emergencies
- Modernize bio-surveillance to a real-time, interoperable system to better detect and respond to problems
- Seriously address antibiotic resistance (antibiotic resistant disease caused by bacteria)
- Improve research, development and manufacturing of medical countermeasures
- Increase readiness for extreme weather events

The Trust for America's Health organization, in their *The 2015 Outbreaks: Protecting Americans from Infectious Diseases* review, also scored Texas a five (5) out of ten (10) on indicators related to preventing, detecting, diagnosing and responding to outbreaks of infectious diseases (<http://healthyamericans.org/reports/bioterror12/release.php?stateid=TX>).

The report, concluded that the United States must redouble efforts to better protect the country from new infectious disease threats, such as MERS-CoV and antibiotic-resistant superbugs, and resurging illnesses like whooping cough, tuberculosis and gonorrhea.

The recent *Texas Homeland Security Strategic Plan 2015-2020* discusses, in-depth, the State's needs for emergency planning, response, and operational coordination, not only for terrorist and criminal acts, but also for natural and technological disasters. It can be found at [http://dps.texas.gov/director\\_staff/txHomelandSecStratPlan2015-2020.pdf](http://dps.texas.gov/director_staff/txHomelandSecStratPlan2015-2020.pdf).

A key consideration, expressed throughout the plan, is the problem of coordination among the various jurisdictions and agencies in Texas, during an emergency. The State has three basic layers of governing jurisdictions: state, county, and municipal. There are also a large number of special districts, such as school districts, college districts, public utility districts, water supply districts, and road districts that are responsible for particular functions during an emergency or disaster. Add to this the fact that Texas is a state large in area, with 180 State agencies, and one can understand how difficult it is and will be to coordinate responses to emergencies and disasters. Arguably, this is the most serious issue for disaster preparedness in this state.

SOURCES:

Levi J, Vinter S, Segal LM, and St. Laurent R. 2012. *Ready or Not? Protecting the Public's Health from Diseases, Disasters, and Bioterrorism, 2010*. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. <http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/reports/2010/rwjf69034> and, <http://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2010/12/-ready-or-not--.html>

Texas Homeland Security Strategic Plan 2010 – 2015. Texas Department of Public Safety and the Office of Governor Rick Perry. <http://esdocs.com/doc/386137/texas-homeland-security-strategic-plan-2010-2015>

Texas Homeland Security Strategic Plan 2015 – 2020. Texas Department of Public Safety and the Office of Governor Rick Abbott. [http://dps.texas.gov/director\\_staff/txHomelandSecStratPlan2015-2020.pdf](http://dps.texas.gov/director_staff/txHomelandSecStratPlan2015-2020.pdf)