

Supply Challenges in the COVID-19 Response and Health Care Emergency Supply Considerations

House State Government Committee

The Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania

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The Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania (HAP), on behalf of its members—more than 240 acute and specialty hospitals and health systems—appreciates the opportunity to provide information regarding the challenges faced and strategies employed to acquire personal protective equipment (PPE) during the COVID-19 response.

The COVID-19 pandemic created extraordinary supply chain challenges for hospitals trying to secure PPE and resources needed to respond to the crisis.

At the peak of the first wave (April 2020), all of the approximately 160 hospitals that were treating COVID-19 inpatients were reporting shortages of key supplies such as N-95 masks, gloves, nasal swabs, and gowns, as well as shortages in testing supplies, including nasopharyngeal specimen collection swabs and viral transport media.

Even if hospitals were able to locate PPE and supplies, they often were an order of magnitude more expensive due to the extreme stress on the supply chain.

Strategies Employed During the First Wave

HAP's emergency management (EM) team regularly coordinates with our members and the larger health care community to make sure they have what is needed to quickly and safely respond to COVID-19 and other emergencies.

During the early months of the pandemic, the following strategies were important:

- Monitoring supply data through the Healthcare Incident Management System and through information requests. This ensured that HAP's EM team had a firm grasp on current capacity and could facilitate health care facility requests for supplies as well as shepherd mutual-aid-borrowing from one facility to another
- HAP's EM team worked extensively with the health care field to share information and reinforce good conservation methods for supplies
- Seeing the urgent need for supplies, Pennsylvania's state government, manufacturing, and life sciences organizations came together to retool their operations and support the health care community in addressing the availability of scarce resources

Second Wave Dynamics

After the first wave, hospitals largely have been able to adequately stock necessary supplies, especially testing supplies. Even during the most recent peak (December 2020/January 2021), less than 15 percent of hospitals treating COVID-19 inpatients reported shortages of supplies.

Among the hospitals recently reporting potential shortages, N-95 masks, gloves, and nasal swabs (and—to a lesser extent—gowns) have been most commonly cited.

Considerations Moving Forward

The dramatic increase in demand for health care supplies like PPE during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed deficiencies in existing emergency supply strategies. State and federal governments had pre-established stockpiles that often had out-of-date or expired products, and the established inventory levels quickly were found to be insufficient to the scope of demand. There also were reports of geographic and structural disparities between health care provider's abilities to obtain sufficient PPE to meet their needs.

In order to mitigate some of the challenges exposed during the COVID-19 response, the following considerations should be incorporated into future pandemic supply strategy conversations:

- Incorporate existing health care supply chain infrastructure into pandemic preparedness planning
 - Health care providers—especially hospitals—have significant investment in supply chain infrastructure. Hospitals often have access to sizeable warehouse, inventory management, and logistics infrastructure that can be leveraged for future planning efforts
- Incorporate existing health care supply chain expertise in future supply strategies
 - Health care providers—especially hospitals and health systems—have sourcing, contracting, purchasing, and inventory management capabilities that may be leveraged on a larger scale to increase overall preparedness
- Leverage stock rotation strategies for future supply stockpiles
 - Obtaining supplies should be only a portion of the conversation. Plans also should be developed to manage stock such that degraded and expired products are minimized