

Expecting the Unexpected

Mark Rath



Cherrystone Family Camping and RV Resort is a 300-acre playground of swimming pools, mini-golf, pier fishing, crabbing, and other activities on the peaceful and historic Eastern Shore in Northampton County, Virginia. Founded in 1964, the campground is only 11 miles north of the 17-mile long Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel that separates the shore from the mainland of Virginia.

At 08:20 AM Thursday morning, July 24, 2014, more than 1300 campers were preparing to enjoy another day in the natural beauty of the campground, when the National Weather Service issued a tornado warning for the area that was valid until 9:00 AM. The tornado had begun in the Chesapeake Bay, a few miles west of the campground. At 08:40 AM, the Enhanced Fujita 1 (EF1) tornado, with winds of 86 to 110 mph, struck the campground with devastating force, with both rotating and straight-line winds and hail. Preliminary reports described multiple trees downed or snapped, with many camping trailers overturned and damaged and several more destroyed.

Seventeen miles away, in Nassawadox, VA, the Riverside Health System's Riverside Shore Memorial Hospital (RSMH), with 60 operational beds, had already begun to prepare for possible mass casualties when they heard about a possible tornado approaching. As soon as the tornado alert was issued, a code purple was called, alerting the Emergency Department (ED) and other medical staff to report and stand ready to receive patients. At the time, no one knew how many patients to expect.

As Riverside's system director of Emergency Management, I was at RSMH that morning, meeting with the Eastern Shore medical director. In response to the alert, I immediately activated the incident command center to coordinate medical staff and supplies, to assess and respond to needs in the ED, and to monitor communications with first responders and Emergency Medical Service personnel in the field.

Response at the hospital was immediate. Within minutes, every local off-duty ED physician was on site, and quickly joined by general surgeons, anesthesiologists, and practitioners of pediatrics, orthopaedics, pulmonology, cardiology, neurology, family medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, and otolaryngology. Hospitalists assisted with evaluation, as did nurses and advanced practice providers from the hospital, physicians' offices, and respondents from home. A psychiatrist with the Eastern Shore Community Services board and a chaplain for hospice came to offer family support and pastoral care to the victims. Additional medical personnel from Riverside Health System's *Newport News* responded quickly to support the shore team.

The first tornado-affected patient was triaged at 09:17 AM. In all, 26 patients came through the ED within 90 minutes of the incident, and 1 later in the afternoon. The majority suffered lacerations and cuts, and were treated and released. Three were admitted to RSMH; 1 required surgery for a hip dislocation and fracture and 2 others were observed overnight. Of these, 1 was an older woman who had a history of underlying medical problems with elevated cardiac enzyme levels, and 1 was a pediatric patient who required additional imaging, as the initial study showed an abnormal lumbar spine. Both patients were released the next day.

Four patients were transferred to other facilities. One adult who sustained a lumbar vertebral fracture with encroachment on the spinal canal was transferred by ground to a Richmond

hospital for neurosurgery, as wind restrictions prevented helicopter transport to the nearer level 1 trauma center in Norfolk. Three children were taken to Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters (CHKD) in Norfolk—2 were treated at RSMH and then transferred to CHKD to be with other members of their family.

The tornado on Virginia's Eastern Shore on that July morning demonstrated the intense and violent power of nature: in addition to the damage and injuries noted, a couple from New Jersey died when a tree fell on their tent as they tried to escape the storm.

The importance of disaster training cannot be overstated. RSMH regularly holds planning exercises for various scenarios. Its last tornado drill was held in March 2014.

The July 24th tornado also demonstrated the ability and commitment of this small community hospital to respond to a disaster of enormous proportion with the same level of skill, expertise, and professionalism that is expected of a larger major medical facility. The administrator of RSMH remembered the level of calm in the ED, especially during the initial surge of incoming patients. No cross words or egos were apparent anywhere; only visible were professional health care providers who were focused on the immediate and urgent goals of assessing the next patient and responding with compassion and a genuine desire to help—to practice medicine at its highest level.

The Eastern Shore community clearly appreciated that Riverside Health System and RSMH took the time and mandated a disaster preparedness program of preparation, planning, and practice that allowed this small community hospital to be ready for this natural disaster and quick response. The realization that this type of disaster can happen at any time to any community without significant warning only reinforces the importance of disaster training and practice.

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Cover Images:

Scenes after a tornado, described as an EF1 with winds of 86 to 110mph, struck the campground, with both tornadic and straight-line wind and hail. Pictures taken by Patrick Robbins, American Red Cross.