

An LA Hospital Settles A Shook-up Community

BY RHODA WEISS

On January 17 Holy Cross Medical Center, Mission Hills, CA, was rocked by an earthquake that forced it to temporarily shut down its inpatient operations. Although the hospital's main building incurred only superficial damage, a patient evacuation was ordered because of interruptions to safety and life-support systems.

The shutdown posed a major public relations challenge to Holy Cross managers. Despite the fact that the hospital was able to continue to treat emergency outpatients and provide radiology, laboratory, and other services, in the eyes of the press and the public, the medical center had become another victim of the quake.

The first priority for Holy Cross managers was to regain momentum in expanding services to the community. The hospital had just opened a new cancer center and was completing the final details for the opening of a new cardiac surgery center. To rebuild confidence, the management team focused on reaching several key audiences.

SUPPORTING PHYSICIANS

Physicians were first on the list. The 6.8 temblor left hundreds of area doctors with no place to practice after scores of medical office buildings were rendered unsafe. "Physicians of all specialties were walking up to our information center in the lobby and asking if they could set up temporary office space anywhere in the hospital to see their patients," says Allene Nungesser, executive vice president and chief operating officer.

Within two days, three hospital employees began making phone calls and contacted several hundred physicians to check on their status and inform them of temporary space available at the hospital. "We were prepared to provide space in certain wings of the main building, in our new cancer center, and in large trailers that we were ordering," Nungesser adds.

A physicians' hot-line number was activated for those needing space, with callers providing information on their specialty and the average number



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of patients they saw daily, as well as on space, staff size, and parking needs. In addition, physicians with undamaged offices willing to share space were matched with physicians in need. A week after the quake, the hospital had 33 temporary tenant physicians practicing in two patient care areas in the hospital.

"We feel this move helped support our physicians and kept them from drifting away from our facility in the chaos," explains Nungesser. "As a result, we developed a stronger bond with our medical staff and helped to keep their practices from being terribly disrupted."

REASSURING STAFF

A second goodwill opportunity was seized upon when California Governor Pete Wilson's office called to request permission to visit the site to publicly thank the state's planning and development agency for quickly certifying the hospital for reopening. The governor met the hospital administrators and toured the facility. His appearance, spirited speech, and the resulting extensive media coverage gave a strong boost of confidence to all hospital personnel.

"Despite the efforts taken to issue daily bulletins updating employees on the hospital's condition and progress, we understandably had employees who were shaken by the toll of the quake and continued forceful aftershocks," Nungesser says.

To help employees deal with the trauma they were experiencing, Holy Cross offered a "Post-earthquake Stress Relief Program." In hour-long sessions, offered during every shift, a chaplain and a social worker facilitated conversations among groups of about eight people about how they were coping with the effects of the earthquake. "Among other things, the experience reassured staff that their reaction to the earthquake and the aftershocks was normal," says Sr. Beth McPherson, CSC, vice president of planning and mission services. The sessions, which were conducted in English and Spanish, taught employees how to

recognize symptoms of trauma such as sleeplessness and agitation.

With the help of its parent system—Holy Cross Health System, South Bend, IN—Holy Cross Medical Center was also able to help employees who needed assistance in relocating after the earthquake. “In addition to the burden of replacing possessions destroyed in the quake, many employees faced moving costs, which often included paying two months’ rent plus a deposit up front,” Sr. McPherson explains. To help employees with these kinds of expenses, the system’s mission outreach fund donated \$50,000. Hospitals affiliated with Holy Cross Health System have contributed another \$20,000 to help quake victims.

As another gesture of support for Holy Cross employees, the system took out a two-page advertisement—“A Message to the Holy Cross Medical Center Staff”—in the Sunday, February 6 *Los Angeles Times*. Beside the image of a jagged graph, the advertisement carried the following message in bold print: “It doesn’t matter whether it’s a seismograph or an EKG. You can handle both.”

REACHING THE PUBLIC

Holy Cross Medical Center itself ran full-page advertisements in major newspapers to emphasize to the public that the facility was open and fully operational. One message to the community displayed a friendly, cartoon-style staff and facility welcoming all and identifying the hospital’s “green-tagged, inspected, and safe” status. In addition, the first birth after the reopening was highly publicized and well covered by local television and print media.

The community at large became a continued concern for the hospital. Minutes after the quake subsided, medical staff met immediate medical needs by treating injured quake victims through medical triage areas set up on campus and street-side. Two weeks after the quake, however, physicians and social service personnel continued to report lingering mental malaise in the community, with adults and children unable to return to normal routines.

Many residents in the San Fernando Valley continued to hole up in temporary “tent cities” because they feared their residences might not be able to withstand the aftershocks. Families reported children unable to sleep in their beds. Senior citizens were dealing with bouts of depression and confusion.

To help citizens get back on their feet emotionally, Holy Cross offered a day-long version of the “Post-earthquake Stress Relief Program” it had made available to its employees. Advertisements and print and broadcast public service announcements invited all to attend. With three

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RATE YOUR NERVES ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 6.6

**Holy Cross Medical Center
Presents A Free
Post Earthquake
Stress Relief Program
For The Whole Family
Saturday, February 12, 1994**

If your nerves are still on edge, if you and your children are having trouble sleeping or concentrating—if you just can’t seem to shake the effects of the earthquake and the after shocks, please join us for this free community presentation and discussions led by Robert Tomaszewski, Phd, Clinical Neuropsychologist; Michael Stevenson, Phd, Clinical Psychologist, sleep specialist and Michael Lupo, M.D.



HOLY CROSS MEDICAL CENTER

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days’ notice, more than 250 adults and 80 children showed up for this series of informal workshop classes taught by a neuropsychologist, a sleep specialist, and counselors.

“This seminar was definitely needed by our community,” says McPherson. “We will continue to monitor the mood of the community and provide further assistance in this area if necessary.”

“Overall, the management team found it a trying yet challenging time. When it comes down to it, our mission helped us to more easily see the needs of our key audiences and meet them. I think we have become a stronger, more closely knit team as a result.” □