

Parish Nurses and Pandemic Preparedness

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**“We must build dikes of courage
to hold back the flood of fear.”
–The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

The Health Ministries Network of Minnesota has been proactive about pandemic preparedness. They hosted an event offered by the Central Minnesota Bioterrorism Hospital Preparedness Program and offered Minnesota’s first Faith Community Pandemic Preparedness Planning Seminar on August 29 in Sartell, MN. In a collaborative effort with public health and emergency management, the event was well attended by parish nurses, church leaders, chaplains, staff of faith-based organizations, and other community leaders.

Many scientists say it is undoubtedly “when” not “if” a pandemic will happen, so preparedness is essential. It is clear all current response systems would be outstripped; we have before us an urgent need to build collaborative networks of response. The faith community has often been first on the scene when disaster strikes.

Today the role of parish nurses spans the full spectrum of the faith community. Having sprung out of Christian roots, the role of parish nurses is being adopted in mosques, synagogues, and many other community organizations. Many-to-most of our hospitals were born out of the faithful work of founders from churches or other religious structures. Over time, the connections diminished, and most health care systems now forge connections to faith communities through their spiritual care departments. Alongside hospital chaplains, parish nurses carry forward this vital connection between the medical sector and faith communities.

In 1997, the ANA recognized parish nurses as a needed nursing specialty with clear roles and standards of practice. Primarily, parish nurses help individuals and families take responsibility for their own health and wellness. At the heart of pandemic preparedness is the individual and family need to engage personal responsibility to sustain basic health and wellness if our society is altered by a crisis.

Parish nurses offer hospital staff a source of community support to counter worry with purposeful action. Understanding how faith is central to a positive attitude, parish nurses help others remain hopeful. People in crisis may be immobilized by fear, and such responses must be countered with hope and courage. Hope creates energy and sustains focus, providing a lifeline to one caught in a crisis. Faith community leaders functioning as ‘dikes of courage’ will keep our emergency rooms freer of ‘worried patients’ for those truly desperate for medical care.

Parish nurses can assist individuals and families in their faith community sort through the pandemic preparedness information. As members of the pastoral staff, parish nurses are positioned to make appropriate referrals to public health and other reliable informational resources. Parish nurses also can assist local congregations in convening preparedness planning workshops. Working to improve one’s ability to be self-sustained in an altered state of society reduces the fear of pandemic. Preplanning reduces vulnerability and sets broader relationships in place for when they are needed.

A pandemic would affect all members of society. Currently, parish nurses are often the source of community care to discharged patients, isolated seniors, the homebound, the handicapped, the chronically ill, and other special needs populations. Parish nurses can work collaboratively to reach individuals on the margins.

Parish Nurses, because of their trusted presence, can readily function as point persons in a pandemic situation. Their faith and hope, as living tokens, will go a long way in building the “dikes of courage” needed to face the

NOTE: At their first seminar, more than 61 individuals signed up to become Congregational Contacts for their area. Congregational Contacts are needed to convene, communicate, and access resources available in the event of a pandemic or disaster.

To learn more about the Health Ministries Network of Minnesota, or starting a “Congregational Contacts” list in your area, call Jeannie Hill at 612-220-2166 or e-mail her at jeanniehill654@msn.com.

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