

# Oklahoma's sophisticated emergency response system

For more than two decades, the state's Regional Medical Response System/Healthcare Coalition has enhanced preparedness for health crises and natural disasters.



## The need for statewide coordination

The bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995 exposed the need for better collaboration between health care and public health. In 1999, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security provided a grant to integrate local and sub-state emergency management, health, and medical systems into a coordinated network capable of responding effectively to mass casualty events.

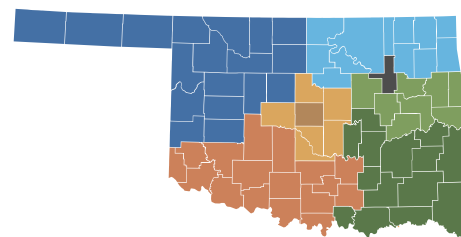


In 2003, the Oklahoma State Department of Health established the **Regional Medical Response System (RMRS)/Healthcare Coalition (HCC)** to support its objective of maintaining and enhancing emergency preparedness across local public health and medical systems.

For more than two decades, this system has enabled a cohesive, efficient response to emergencies, including the COVID-19 pandemic and tornadoes. This work continues to be supported by the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response (ASPR).

## Sharing data and coordinating resources

The RMRS/HCC creates emergency preparedness and response plans for public, private, and tribal partners across the state, with local health departments acting as the boots on the ground to implement these plans during emergencies. The system established regional medical planning groups in eight regions of Oklahoma, which collaborate to share resources, data, and staff. The RMRS continues to build capacity by hosting regular trainings and exercises to test and enhance emergency response plans for health care organizations. When a crisis arises, the Medical Emergency Response Center (MERC) leads emergency operations and coordinates across multiple jurisdictions or counties within a sub-state region. Meanwhile, the Oklahoma State Department of Health Situation Room monitors and supports medical system response activities in all regions of the state. Oklahoma utilizes the Medical Reserve Corp (MRC) program to bolster its healthcare infrastructure. The MRC platform, the Emergency System for Advanced Registration of Volunteer Health Professionals (ESAR-VHP), facilitates the pre-verification of volunteers' identities, licenses, credentials, accreditations, and hospital privileges. This proactive measure streamlines the deployment process, enabling the swift mobilization of qualified health care professionals during emergency events.



To better understand the status of respiratory viruses at the regional level, the RMRS provides weekly summaries of influenza, RSV, and COVID-19 surveillance data, including sentinel surveillance data, severity of illness data, and testing data. Due to the RMRS/HCC, hospital system leadership has become more involved, leading to enhanced data sharing between hospitals. Additionally, the number and quality of collaborations during emergencies have increased, including new partnerships with the University of Oklahoma and Children's Hospital and Indian Health Services.



## Springing to action

On April 19, 2023, **18 tornadoes hit central Oklahoma**, and the Region 6/8 RMRS jumped in to coordinate a timely and successful response. Within three hours of a nursing home being destroyed, the HCC coordinated with nearby hospitals, emergency medical services, public health, and long-term care facilities to **relocate 79 residents**. The quick response relied on lessons learned from previous disaster responses, extensive trainings, and established relationships with health care and emergency partner networks.

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## The future of partnership

In the past five years of a cooperative agreement with ASPR, the HCC has strengthened preparedness and response planning across its regional groups. In the next five years, the HCC plans to increase capacity, focus on risk assessment, and promote collaboration.



**Increasing capacity:** By advancing the HCC's ability to support health care readiness, it will be prepared to respond to a changing threat landscape and community needs.



**Risk assessment and mitigation:** The HCC will continue to anticipate challenges and mitigate risks for health care systems during disasters and emergencies, with an emphasis on cybersecurity and extended downtime procedures.



**Collaboration and engagement:** The HCC will prioritize a whole-community approach to health care readiness across the delivery system.

### Interested in doing this work in your own community?

Identify the various health systems and public health departments in your region that should be involved in emergency preparedness. Work together to create readiness plans and move beyond preparedness on paper by carrying out regular exercises to test these plans. Collaborate with regional health system partners to identify potential health crises to impact all partners, and create shared plans to both prevent and respond to those crises. Identify other jurisdictions across the country doing similar work and share best practices and lessons learned to improve these shared cross-sector plans.

And, of course, join the Common Health Coalition! Head to [CommonHealthCoalition.org](https://www.commonhealthcoalition.org) for more examples and resources on how health care and public health can work together to improve outcomes.