

First came pandemic surge, then Ida. How Ochsner Health responded.

OCT 12, 2021

Jennifer Lubell

Contributing News Writer

Louisiana health system Ochsner Health faced a double challenge late this summer with Hurricane Ida and a huge surge in COVID-19 cases. Having learned a few lessons from 2005's Hurricane Katrina, "we've got very specific systems and protocols in how we prepare for a hurricane," said Warner Thomas, president and CEO of Ochsner Health, a nonprofit health system that serves Louisiana, Mississippi and the Gulf South.

Even so, Hurricane Ida threw in a few unexpected curve balls. The pandemic also complicated things, said Thomas, who joined Robert Hart, MD, Ochsner Health's chief medical officer, in a recent episode of "AMA Moving Medicine." Through teamwork, resilience and quick problem-solving, the health system was able to safeguard patients and the community. Ochsner Health is an AMA Health System Program member.

Storm "blew up quickly"

With 155 mile-per-hour winds, Hurricane Ida slammed into Louisiana in late August as a Category 4 storm. Health care organizations usually have several weeks to watch storms develop in the Gulf. With Ida, the Ochsner team had only four days to prepare.

"This storm blew up pretty quickly," said Dr. Hart. COVID-19 patients added another layer of urgency.

Preparation in part is about infrastructure—power and water, said Thomas. "If you've got power and water, you can figure a lot of other things out. But if you lose power and water, then things get difficult very quickly."

One post-Katrina improvement, the installation of systemwide generators, was a game changer. Clinicians were able to keep many patients in place that way, said Dr. Hart. “And we’ve done this enough where we have teams that come in at certain times and they’re here for the duration of the storm.”

How COVID-19 changed the rules

With Ida, planning was slightly different because of COVID-19 dynamic, said Dr. Hart. In past storms, people often end up in the same room, huddling close together. This time, staff had to add more room, more distance between people, ensuring that people were adhering to COVID-19 safety measures.

Ochsner has also been encouraging COVID-19 vaccinations through forums and one-on-one conversations, ahead of the planned federal vaccine mandate from the Biden administration. “We’ve still got work to go, but we’re getting there,” said Dr. Hart.

The AMA recognizes the critical importance of scientific integrity, transparency and public trust in the fight to contain the global spread of COVID-19. Stay updated with the AMA on COVID-19 and vaccine development.

Preparing for the unexpected

Two of Ochsner’s Bayou facilities had to evacuate due to higher-than-expected sustained winds. Inpatients were moved to other Ochsner facilities, although the emergency departments in Bayou stayed open.

Emergency medicine teams were prepared for a variety of post-hurricane injuries, such as cerebral bleeds, roof falls and heart attacks, said Dr. Hart. “We went from very little activity in the height of the storm to just a crescendo of business in that next 24 hours.”

All the planning you do won’t account for sudden changes in storm patterns, he added. Frequent communication through systemwide meetings and phone calls to staff is key.

Ramping up after the storm

Even before Ida, Ochsner had been canceling some surgeries and redeploying patients into other areas of the hospital to accommodate COVID-19 patients. After the storm, “it’s a gradual growth” to prioritize thousands of canceled procedures, get patients back in, and redeploy staff and operating rooms, said Dr. Hart.

The health system supported its employees through assistance payments, providing food, supplies and housing, and opening gas stations on its campuses.

Within a month after Ida struck Louisiana, many of Ochsner’s facilities were back to 100% capacity. “More than half of our surgeries are rescheduled. Our clinic patients are now more than half rescheduled,” said Thomas, who has sought funding on Capitol Hill for post-Ida cleanup efforts.

“AMA Moving Medicine” highlights innovation and the emerging issues that impact physicians and public health today. You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version, which also features educational presentations and in-depth discussions.