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This Is Not a Drill

Community Health Systems hospitals contend with aftermath of Alabama tornadoes

LIKE HCA, HealthTrust member Community Health Systems based in Franklin, Tenn., saw five of its affiliated hospitals in northern Alabama affected by a wave of tornadoes that crossed Alabama, Tennessee and Georgia on April 27.

The waves of twisters sparked emergencies at Trinity Medical Center (Birmingham), Cherokee Medical Center (Centre), DeKalb Regional Medical

Center (Fort Payne), Crestwood Medical Center (Huntsville) and Gadsden Regional Medical Center (Gadsden).

Thanks to having emergency preparedness plans, the hospitals were able to continue functioning and cared for hundreds of people in their communities. All told, CHS-affiliated Alabama hospitals treated nearly 340 patients who were injured by the storms.

Ground Zero: DeKalb Regional Medical Center

Many of those treated went to DeKalb Regional Medical Center—the emergency department took in 93 patients in the hours following the “all-clear” and another 121 patients with storm-related complaints over the next nine days.

The challenge would have been overwhelming without many hours of methodical planning and detailed drills, says DeKalb CEO **Jeff Rains**.

“Though planning and running drills multiple times a year can be tedious, tiresome and sometimes costly, it is absolutely critical to performing well in emergencies,” Rains explains. “Our training was the one thing that put us in a position to respond successfully and to be able to care for our patients and the people of area.”

Communication was a big part of the drills and was also important in planning and in the response, he adds. It was crucial for everyone to understand their roles and what was expected of them beforehand, and then to continue to communicate well during the harried hours after the storm.

“Had we not devoted the necessary time and effort to those drills, we would not have performed as well as we did that night,” Rains says.

The tornado and storms that hit DeKalb County did not damage the hospital, but did knock out power and communication lines. The hospital’s two backup diesel generators kicked on immediately and supplied electricity for essential services.

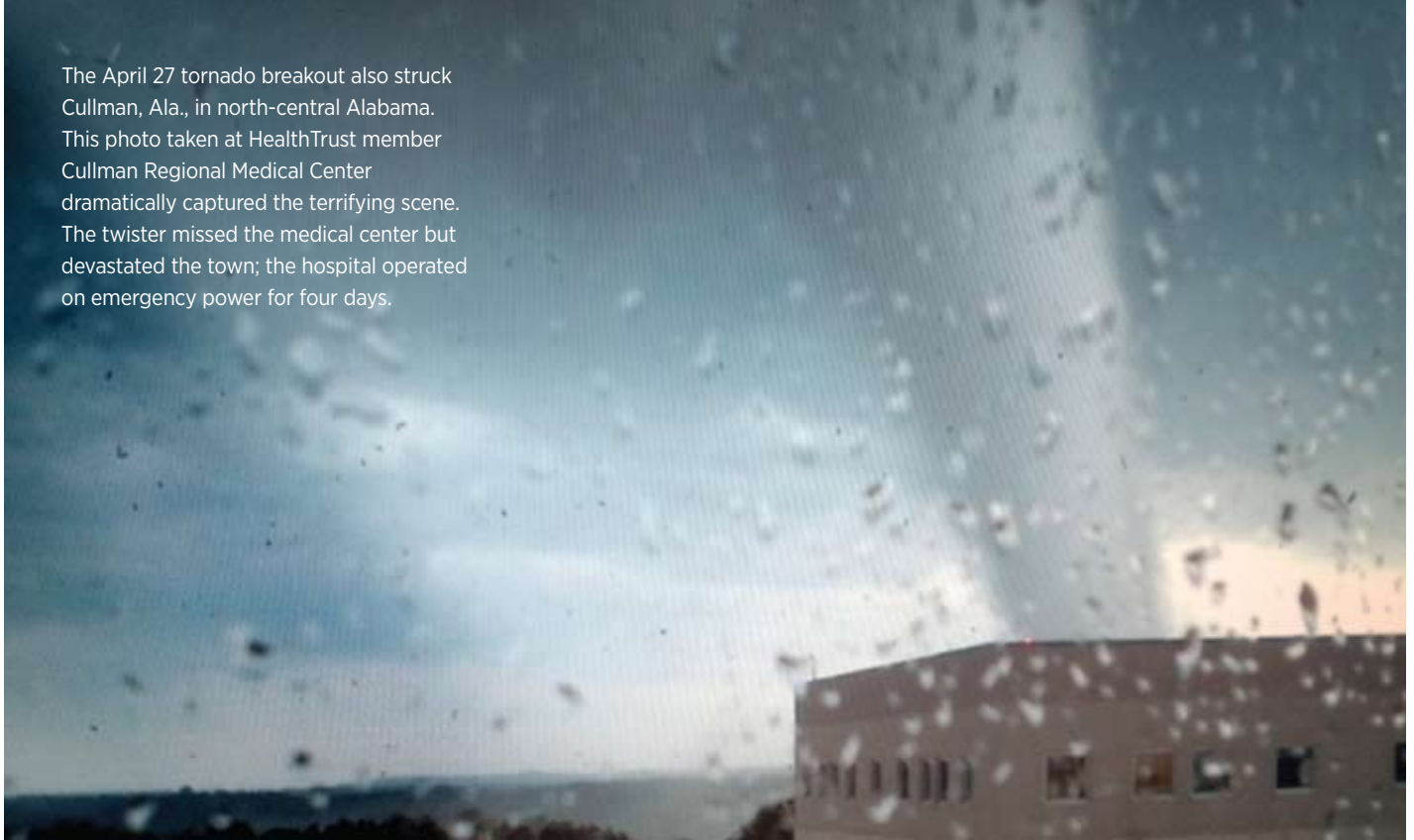
(Cherokee and Crestwood also ran backup generators for a couple of days after the storm.)

Through a pre-arranged agreement, a third, larger generator arrived early the next morning. Fuel vendors were already on alert and made deliveries every 12 hours to top off fuel tanks until power was restored, some 60 hours after the storm.

“The reaction of our vendors and suppliers was tremendous. They called us offering to bring in supplies on off-day schedules, anything we needed. As a result, we didn’t have any disruptions in resupplying the hospital,” he says.

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The April 27 tornado breakout also struck Cullman, Ala., in north-central Alabama. This photo taken at HealthTrust member Cullman Regional Medical Center dramatically captured the terrifying scene. The twister missed the medical center but devastated the town; the hospital operated on emergency power for four days.



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With phone lines down or jammed, the hospital relied on radio systems to keep in touch with local emergency responders and with other hospitals across the ravaged state, Rains says.

DeKalb Regional has plans for many kinds of emergencies and disasters. The tornado plan includes codes to alert staff that a twister is near, cueing them to move patients into interior corridors and close room doors to minimize the threat of flying glass and debris.

Hospital employees had watched anxiously all day as the monster front moved across Mississippi into Alabama and continued its lethal eastward course. Though shifts changed as usual, “as trained professional health-care providers, our people understand that if an event like this impacts the community, the hospital will be affected, so they stayed close to their phones and pagers,” Rains says.

The hospital had about 30 minutes’ advance warning that a tornado would be on the ground, enough time to move employees and patients and prepare for the inevitable influx of injured neighbors.

Unlike Tuscaloosa, Ala., and some other towns where debris blocked roads, the DeKalb twister hit mostly in rural areas, where it destroyed hundreds of homes and other buildings. So emergency responders were able to navigate streets to locate and assist the injured.

With only 17 beds in its emergency department, DeKalb had set up other triage and treatment areas. “An influx like that requires planning and thought about where to direct the overflow, how to staff and how to make sure patients are tended to in the most appropriate locations,” Rains says.

For example, the most critical patients were taken to

DEATHS IN ALABAMA

238

DEATHS IN DEKALB COUNTY

35

HOUSES

1,002
DAMAGED

301

DESTROYED

MOBILE HOMES

154

DAMAGED

78

DESTROYED

BUSINESSES

46

DAMAGED

19

DESTROYED

the operating and recovery and holding areas because of the severity of their injuries. “That way, they were near the operating rooms if they ended up needing surgery,” he explains.

Staff were called in as needed, based on the plan and the emerging situation. A number of employees also came in voluntarily, knowing they could help. And in some cases, those employees had suffered as well.

“We had several employees who lost everything,” Rains says. “So we were calling on our people to help their community while at the same time some of them were dealing with the loss of homes, cars, everything.”

The unprecedented tornado outbreak continued into the next day along the Atlantic coast. In Alabama, 238 people died, including 35 in DeKalb County. Also, in just this one county, 1,002 houses were damaged and 301 destroyed; 154 mobile homes were damaged and 78 destroyed; 46 businesses were damaged with 19 destroyed; and 538 barns, sheds or outbuildings were damaged, with 267 destroyed.

Though stunned and fighting their own grief and loss, the DeKalb Regional Medical Center staff responded heroically.

“The most impressive part to me, as I told our staff, was that when the storm had passed and other families were coming out of their basements and safe rooms and putting their kids to bed or assessing damage, a lot of our people were getting in their cars and coming to work,” he says.

“It really speaks volumes about the staff we have and their responsiveness—and not just the hospital staff, but also all the emergency personnel. People really saw the compassion and caring that goes into this kind of job.” **S**