

## Six hospital evacuations in NY-NJ. Hospitals closed for a Drone weapons site

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The storm that hit the U.S. East Coast Oct. 29 exposed the harm done by capitalist priorities in the crucial areas of essential health care and electric power for millions.

Some 400 available industrial-scale generators sat unused while four major New York City hospitals located in flood zones and two New Jersey hospitals were forced to evacuate on an emergency basis. In the hospitals both the main energy source and emergency backup generators failed, providing the clearest possible example of bone-deep hospital and infrastructure maintenance cuts.

Meanwhile, high-rise apartment houses and entire neighborhoods went for days without electric power. That meant days without drinking water, flush toilets, heat or functioning elevators. This creates life-threatening conditions, especially for seniors, the disabled and infants.

Every decision in this capitalist society is based on the necessity to maximize profit, even when conditions for tens of thousands of people hang in the balance. The response to Hurricane Sandy exposed callous disregard, years of neglect and complete lack of planning.

Wall Street up quickly

In contrast to the neglect elsewhere, the Wall Street Stock Exchange was up and running with backup generators in 36 hours. Billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg declared this a major victory. For the corporate rulers, it was.

Meanwhile, the desperate attempts to evacuate hundreds of patients from hospitals were turned into a sideline human-interest story. Medical personnel hauled fuel and water up flights of steps in a desperate effort to keep the backup generators functioning. Then they carried patients down darkened stairwells, operating respirators by hand for newborn infants in mass evacuations.

Managers and officials knew well in advance of the storm how unprepared NYC hospitals would be in the face of a crisis, but they made no preparations and heeded no warnings: "The problem of unreliable backup electricity at hospitals is not new. Over the first six months of the year, 23 percent of the hospitals inspected by the Joint Commission, a health care facility accreditation group, were found to be out of compliance with standards for backup power and lighting." (AP, Nov. 1)

City officials understood the potential problems for New York University Hospital and Coney Island Hospital so well that they ordered evacuations before Hurricane Irene in 2011.

Though storm and evacuation warnings were more dire for Hurricane Sandy and began a week in advance, NYU Hospital spokeswoman Allison Clair said, “This year we were not told to evacuate by the city.” (CBS/AP, Oct. 31)

There was extensive media coverage of the emergency evacuation in high winds and driving rain of 300 patients at NYU Hospital, a major private hospital, due to the breakdown of backup generators. Ambulances stretched for blocs waiting to move patients with acute problems. But the difficulties of matching equipment, medications and patient care when hundreds of patients are moved under these conditions were totally ignored.

Coney Island Hospital, in one of the hardest hit areas of Brooklyn, was also not told to evacuate before the storm. It was then compelled to evacuate 300 patients under crisis conditions. This is an acute care facility, with surgery and emergency rooms and a maternity care ward. It handles 18,000 patients a year and performs about 8,000 surgical procedures a year.

Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan, the largest acute care public hospital in NYC, was forced to evacuate 700 patients. Three days before that, medical staff and National Guard attempted to carry water and fuel up many flights to backup generators, which finally broke down. Bellevue is considered the flagship or premiere hospital among NYC’s faltering public facilities. It is expected to be closed for several weeks.

Bird S. Coler Hospital, a large public, long-term care facility with 800 patients at the north end of Roosevelt Island in the East River, had to partially evacuate when hospital electricity and backup generators failed. Hundreds of other patients and overworked staff are coping with cold buildings and only partial power. Many patients are being moved to the already overstretched Goldwater Hospital, another long-term care public hospital on Roosevelt Island.

Areawide crisis as 400 FEMA generators sit idle

In New Jersey, Hoboken University Medical Center and Palisades Medical Center were also evacuated amid failing power from backup sources.

Approximately 30 New Jersey acute care hospitals were operating on backup generators after the storm, said Kerry McKean Kelly, a spokeswoman for the New Jersey Hospital Association. (modernhealthcare.com, Oct. 30) Eight Pennsylvania hospitals experienced power outages and were operating on backup generators on Oct. 30.

Are all these failures just accidents?

Backup generators provide only the most essential services. In many hospitals, the computers with patient records and medical information were unavailable. Staten Island Hospital and North Shore Long Island Jewish Health System lacked access to patient computerized records. Tens of thousands of essential surgeries, tests and medical procedures had to be postponed.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency announced that 400 giant, industrial-size generators sufficient to power hospitals, government buildings and major housing complexes were available in the area. However, in New York City, according to state officials, not a single FEMA generator had been deployed. (Wall Street Journal, Nov. 2) This

exposes the lack of planning and attention to people's needs.

Tens of thousands of people living in NYC public housing projects and high-rise towers were still without power, heat, drinking water or water to flush toilets a week after the storm hit.

Media pictures showed truck-size generators, sufficient to power hundreds of homes, sitting idle, awaiting use at a media tent for the NYC Marathon. Marathon preparations aroused such outrage that Bloomberg was forced to cancel the event. But the generators stayed idle.

\$ spent on warfare, not health care

The problem is not that new facilities geared for more severe weather and safe for high-tech equipment can't be built in New York City or that existing infrastructure can't be reinforced.

Bloomberg has focused attention on converting the Coler-Goldwater Hospital complex on Roosevelt Island into a special high-tech weapons lab and science center run by the Israeli Institute of Technology, better known as Technion. That means closing a major long-term care hospital to open an Israeli weapons plant to make drones. It's a profitable choice.

Technion was also given the land of the Goldwater Hospital site — 2.1 million square feet on Roosevelt Island. Last year the city budgeted \$100 million in New York taxpayer funds to rebuild the infrastructure on the Technion site. (New York Times, Dec. 19, 2011)

Many long-term care patients at Goldwater Hospital are immigrants who cannot get treatment at private hospitals. If there is no room for them at other city hospitals, these sick patients will be deported.

The climate-change storm is only one part of the capitalist system's problem. There is growing recognition that the dramatic weather patterns are due to insatiable, profit-first corporate policies. There is little social apparatus in place to organize society in times of crisis and the essential infrastructure has begun to unravel due to years of cutbacks.

In a crisis of this magnitude, it is important for revolutionary activists to participate in people's relief efforts, to work with community groups providing immediate assistance to those in need, and to project a socialist perspective on what could be done. Demands should be made on the capitalist government at every level — since it has the resources available — to provide emergency aid, especially to the poorest and most isolated sectors of the population.

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