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**Priority Dispatch Implementation Guide
for
Maine EMS Services and EMD Centers
Dated October 3, 2011
Revised December 7, 2012, November 5, 2014**

Purpose:

At its August 3, 2011 meeting, the Maine Board of Emergency Medical Services approved the use of priority dispatch as an option for Maine licensed EMS services, in accordance with Board-approved standards.

This document was created to assist Maine licensed EMS services in developing and implementing prioritized medical response plans based upon determinant codes provided by Maine licensed Emergency Medical Dispatch (EMD) Centers.

Background

In 2007, Maine EMS began licensing EMD Centers and emergency medical dispatchers to provide emergency medical dispatch services pursuant to law and Rules developed by Maine EMS and the Emergency Services Communications Bureau (ESCB).

Emergency Medical Dispatch is the reception and management of requests for emergency medical assistance. Maine's EMD system consists of thirty-three licensed EMD Centers and 504 licensed emergency medical dispatchers, and includes:

- Training, certification, licensing and continuing education for EMD Centers and emergency medical dispatchers;
- A statewide EMD protocol. In 2009, the Maine EMS Board began the transition to the National Academies of Emergency Dispatch (NAED) EMD protocol as Maine's Statewide EMD protocol; by July 1, 2010, all EMD centers in Maine had transitioned to the Statewide protocol. The protocol, first developed by Dr. Jeff Clawson in the 1980s is now used in twenty-three countries and has been translated into fourteen languages;
- A system of Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement. Over one hundred EMD Quality Assurance Case Reviewers help ensure that Maine's emergency medical dispatchers provide service in accordance with the Maine's statewide EMD protocol.

From an operational standpoint, the EMD protocol provides;

- Scripted case entry questions and chief complaint protocols that ensure consistency in the EMD process;
- Determinant codes used by responding EMS services to send the right resource in the right response mode. In developing a priority dispatch plan, Maine EMS services will use determinant codes as the basis for determining the level of EMS response, along with the response mode to be used (i.e., “Cold” or “Hot” Response).

Determinant codes do not replace “plain English” descriptions used in dispatch; rather the code provides a clear link to the response assignment for the type of call being dispatched. For more information about determinant codes, see NAED’s publication [*Determinant Codes Versus Response: Understanding How It Is Done.*](#)

- Dispatch Life Support (DLS) – Emergency Medical Dispatchers become the “First, First Responders” – The EMD protocol includes Post Dispatch Instructions (PDIs) and Pre-Arrival Instructions (PAIs) for Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), Foreign Body Airway Obstruction (FBAO), Childbirth, Use of an Automatic External Defibrillator (AED). Delivery of Dispatch Life Support by licensed emergency medical dispatchers can and has resulted in EMS arriving to a viable patient, instead of one deprived of oxygen for several minutes. Other PDIs include bleeding control, Aspirin administration for non traumatic chest pain and instructions to callers (to help facilitate EMS’ arrival).

Maine’s EMD system consists of trained, competent and licensed emergency medical dispatchers, a proven EMD protocol, and a quality assurance process that ensures consistent, accurate dispatching of emergency medical calls. The final piece of the system is the implementation of priority dispatch by Maine EMS providers.

Priority Dispatch for Maine EMS Services

The choice to implement a priority dispatch system will represent a significant change for many EMS services and EMS providers. Traditionally, a response to a medical emergency meant sending an ambulance staffed with various levels of licensed providers, responding with red lights and siren. The priority dispatch system provides for pre-planning of response configurations by the EMS agency and the agency’s medical director, resulting in a reduction in the number of “hot” responses and better use of available resources. Paramedics are dispatched to those calls requiring an advanced life support level of care, but not necessarily to calls that may be appropriately handled by lower licensed providers.

Why implement priority dispatch? Priority dispatch means better resource utilization and improved safety by eliminating unnecessary “Hot” ambulance responses.

Using Determinate Codes – Service-Approved Policies vs. Response Assignment Plans

A Maine EMS service can use determinant codes to facilitate response in several ways. Some uses can be governed by service-level policies and others must have Maine EMS Board approval.

Maine EMS services may develop service level policies and procedures to use determinate codes to:

- Define response modes (red lights and siren [RLS] vs. non-RLS) based upon determinate code level;
- Determine response level (e.g., ambulance, ambulance and engine, ambulance, engine and rescue, etc.)
- Identify “automatic advanced life support (ALS)” situations, where the determinate code is used as a trigger to automatically dispatch ALS backup to the call.

A Maine EMS-approved Response Assignment Plan is required for services that wish to:

- Provide a response using personnel that are licensed at a lower level than for which the service is licensed. For example, a Paramedic-licensed service that wants to run a basic life support (BLS) truck to handle calls that do not require an ALS response (e.g. Alpha and Bravo level calls).
- Provide non-ambulance response based upon the determinate code (e.g., sending a fly car with a licensed provider to a “lift assist” instead of an ambulance response.)
- Develop non-EMS referrals for “Omega” levels calls processed by EMD Centers (e.g., referral to the Maine Poison Control Center)

In all the instances described above, the service needs to establish an operational and quality improvement relationship with its communications center in order to ensure that issues that arise between dispatch and response agencies are reviewed and resolved expeditiously.

Response Assignment Plan Implementation Standards

The Maine EMS Board identified standards for Maine EMS services seeking to implement a priority dispatch system. The standards encompass requirements for both EMS services and EMD Centers, and help ensure that the necessary dispatch and response components are in place for a successful priority dispatch system.

To implement response assignment plan, a Maine EMS service needs to:

1. Have a service medical director. The service medical director is a licensed physician who plays an integral part in development, approval and oversight of response levels and response modes.
2. Be compliant with Maine EMS Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement requirements;
3. Develop a response assignment plan and have it approved by the service’s medical director. Response assignment plans identify the level of response by the service and the response mode determines the mode (i.e., red lights and siren vs. non-red lights and siren) for each determinant code. Once completed the service files and updates the response assignment plan with Maine EMS.

Response assignment templates are available through Maine EMS; and,

4. Provide training for EMS service personnel about the EMD system, and the use of determinant codes and response assignments. EMS providers need a basic understanding of the EMD process and an in-depth understanding of how and why the determinate codes are used.

EMD Awareness for EMS Providers is a 1.5 – 2 hour program - available through Maine EMS approved trainers – that meets the training requirements described in paragraph 4, above. You can contact your 9-1-1 Center, or Maine EMS for more information about how to have the *Awareness* program delivered in your area.

In order to provide determinant codes for a Maine EMS approved priority dispatch system, a Maine EMD Center must:

1. Have a Dispatch Review Committee (DRC) made up of key operations personnel from the EMD Center such as a shift supervisor, field representative, line dispatcher, EMD QA personnel, training officers and other members as appropriate. The DRC must also include one or more (field) EMS representatives.

The DRC provides operational oversight of EMD protocol compliance and reviews specific cases and processes that may be at issue within the Center as well as those identified by EMS field providers. The DRC is also the working group with which a service will communicate as it develops its response assignment plan.

EMD Centers already have (identified) Maine EMS quality assurance committees; those same personnel along with one or more EMS field provider representatives could fulfill the DRC requirement and function;

2. Have a Dispatch Steering Committee (DSC). The DSC is a policy-making group made up of the Communications Center Director, EMD Center Director, Quality Assurance Directors, and Public Safety Administrators (e.g., EMS Director, Medical Director, Police Chief, Fire Chief) and the chair of the DRC.

Many EMD Centers already have such organizational structures in its Communications Center Board of Directors, or other group that has policy-making authority for the Center; and,

3. Complete one hundred EMD case reviews per month (or one hundred percent of all EMD calls if the center processes less than one hundred EMD calls per month) and maintain a three month average of 90% center compliance to protocol.

The EMS service and the EMD center also need to jointly develop and implement an inter-agency quality assurance/quality improvement process to monitor the priority dispatch process and address dispatch/response issues. The key to a successful priority dispatch system is organized and active communication between dispatch and the field provider. EMD and EMS quality assurance personnel and service and center directors need to ensure that situations or concerns that arise as part of the priority dispatch process are expeditiously identified, reviewed and resolved.

The National Academies of EMD provides an EMS Quality Assurance Feedback form, which is available through the Maine EMS web site at http://www.maine.gov/dps/ems/emd_resources.html. The form provides a standardized tool for field responders to provide feedback to EMD center personnel about a particular call or process.

Getting Started

The first step for a Maine EMS service that chooses to implement priority dispatch is to contact the service's EMD Center and (any) other dispatch centers that provide dispatch to the service.

Representatives of the EMS service, the EMD Center and applicable dispatch centers need to meet to:

- Ensure that the EMS service is aware of the capabilities and limitations of the EMD Center (both technological and resource-wise). EMS service directors need to understand the limitations inherent with an EMD Center serving multiple municipalities and Communications Center Directors need to be familiar with the expectations of the EMS service.
- Ensure that Non-EMD-licensed dispatch centers providing dispatch to the service understand and acknowledge the role they play in passing along EMD information (from the EMD Center) as part of the dispatch process
- Begin establishing points of contact and a feedback mechanism between the EMS service and EMD and dispatch centers to ensure timely review and resolution of issues.

- Develop a process for periodic review and timely notification of the EMS service and dispatch entities when changes to EMD, dispatch process or the priority response plan occur.
- Identify a plan for the EMS service and dispatch centers to meet the Maine EMS Board requirements for implementing priority dispatch.

Establishing and maintaining good working relationships amongst EMS services EMD Centers and dispatch centers will be key to the success of priority dispatch plans.

Please contact Maine EMS with your questions about priority dispatch.

Resources

The [EMD Resources](#) page of the Maine EMS web site contains information about priority dispatch, including the NAED's [*Determinant Codes Versus Response: Understanding How It Is Done*](#).

Other links that may be helpful are:

The NAED web site: www.emergencydispatch.org

Priority Dispatch Inc. PDI is the training and product distribution partner of the NAED:
<http://www.prioritydispatch.net>

The Emergency Services Communications Bureau: www.maine911.com