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TO: EMERGENCY RECEIVING CENTER (ERC) HOSPITALS
AMBULANCE PROVIDERS
911 PARAMEDIC PROVIDERS

FROM: CARL H. SCHULTZ, MD *CAS*
EMS MEDICAL DIRECTOR
ORANGE COUNTY HEALTH CARE AGENCY

**SUBJECT: EMERGENCY DIRECTIVES TO ADDRESS THE COVID HEALTH CARE
CRISIS**

The health care system in Orange County is now in crisis resulting from an overwhelming increase in the number of COVID infected patients. The County's EMS system is experiencing unprecedented increases in diversion hours, Ambulance Patient Offload Times (APOT) and the number of hospitals on diversion. In addition, ambulance EMTs are waiting hours just to transfer patients from their vehicles to emergency departments. This results in dangerous delays in initial patient assessments to ensure they don't have an emergency medical condition. Hospitals are overwhelmed with admitted patients to both the floors and the ICUs. At the current rate of deterioration, the EMS system may collapse unless emergency directives are implemented now.

I completely understand the pressure under which many hospitals are functioning. However, there are still some actions hospitals can take that will improve the situation. These include the following:

- Activate their hospital surge plan
- Establish alternate treatment areas within the emergency department to expand capacity
- Cancel all elective surgeries
- Apply for appropriate CDPH waivers in support of surge plans
- Establish their hospital emergency operations center (HCC)

To those facilities that have activated these initiatives, all healthcare partners and the citizens of Orange County are grateful. To those who have chosen not to take this painful but necessary actions, there is still time, but you must act now.

While I still remain hopeful that more actions by hospitals can improve the current pre-hospital crisis, I am implementing the following emergency directives, effective immediately.

- Ambulances may travel to hospitals more than 20 minutes from their standard destination in order to transport patients to hospitals that can accept them.
- Ambulances that have arrived at an ERC with a patient who called 911 but who has been held in the ambulance by emergency department directive for more than 1 hour may depart for another ERC after notifying the emergency department that they are leaving. It is important for all ERCs to note that refusing to off-load patients from a 911 dispatched ambulance for more than 60 minutes causing the ambulance to leave for another ERC potentially risks an EMTALA violation and potential investigation by the California Department of Public Health.
- The option for ERCs to go on diversion will be suspended when the following occur:
 - Excessive hospital diversion hours accumulate in any 24 hour period
 - Excessive number of diversion hours occur in any 24 hour period.
 - Excessive APOTs occur over any 24 hour period
 - 911 ambulances are not permitted to off-load patients for at least 60 minutes.
- Implement assess and refer policies in specific regions if the above directives fail to improve the situation.

I very much hope that I will have to opportunity to rescind some or all of these directives in the near future. However, this will depend on the situation that exists at Orange County ERCs. While it is clear no one is to blame for this crisis, all can participate in mitigating its effects.