

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 13, 2018

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HHS Secretary Azar Declares Public Health Emergency in California due to Wildfires

Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Alex Azar today declared a public health emergency in California due to wildfires. The declaration follows President Trump's emergency declaration for the state and gives the HHS [Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services](#) beneficiaries and their healthcare providers and suppliers greater flexibility in meeting emergency health needs created by the wildfires.

"We are working closely with state health authorities and monitoring the needs of healthcare facilities to provide whatever they may need to save lives and protect health," Secretary Azar said. "This declaration will help ensure that Americans who are threatened by these dangerous wildfires and who rely on Medicare, Medicaid, and the Children's Health Insurance Program have continuous access to the care they need."

So far, the wildfires have forced the evacuation of at least two hospitals and eight other healthcare facilities. A smoke advisory was issued for portions of Los Angeles County. Smoke can present a significant health threat for people with asthma and other lung conditions.

HHS has deployed regional emergency coordinators ([RECs](#)) to coordinate with state and local health authorities and emergency response officials. RECs serve as HHS' primary representatives for emergency response and recovery throughout the country at the regional level and work with federal, state, local, tribal and territorial officials and healthcare representatives to plan for public health and medical emergencies.





Staff from HHS' [National Disaster Medical System](#) and the [U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps](#) are prepared to provide medical care and public health support if needed.

In addition, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's [Disaster Distress Helpline](#) is available to assist residents in the impacted areas in coping with the stress of the wildfires. The Disaster Distress Helpline provides immediate 24/7, 365-days-a-year crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. This toll-free, multilingual, and confidential crisis support service is available to all residents in the United States and its territories. Stress, anxiety, and other depression-like symptoms are common reactions in disasters. Call 1-800-985-5990 toll free or text TalkWithUs to 66746 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.

In declaring the public health emergency in California and authorizing flexibilities for CMS beneficiaries, Secretary Azar acted under his authority in the Public Health Service Act and Social Security Act. These actions and flexibilities are retroactive to Nov. 8, 2018.

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Last revised: November 13, 2018
