

Crisis Standards of Care: What Front Line Clinicians Need to Know



Overview:

The Colorado Crisis Standards of Care Plan (CSCP) is designed to assist health care providers in making decisions that maximize patient survival and minimize adverse outcomes in the event that the volume of patients exceeds the capacity of health care providers and facilities, and it is no longer possible for normal standards of care to be maintained.

Responding to a pandemic requires the statewide health care community to come together to share resources and transfer patients, equipment and supplies when reserves run low. It is important to remember that crisis standards of care (CSC) are the last resort for patient care and will only go into effect after all possible treatment avenues have been explored and all resources have been exhausted.

Just as the health care community works collaboratively to care for patients during a pandemic, it also synchronizes its response to crisis standards of care. Each hospital or health system will utilize the same framework when making difficult decisions about limited resources so that staff and patients can know that the care provided in their facility will not differ from that of other hospitals/health systems in the community.

What to expect if your hospital shifts to crisis standards of care:

In the event that patient volume exceeds available resources, your facility will transition to crisis standards of care and prioritize hospital resources to do the most good for the most patients. In advance of this happening, your facility or health system should convene a crisis standards of care triage committee, which may include senior level administrators, palliative care specialists, physicians, medical ethicists, clinical leaders like your chief medical and/or nursing officer and patient advocates. This group is charged with outlining, typically in the form of a triage algorithm, how these difficult decisions will be made in a standardized and ethical way. Individual health care providers can then rely on the triage algorithm as they provide care for patients. The triage committee can be counted on for support to clinicians making decisions within the algorithm or for cases that fall into “gray areas.”

How crisis standards of care might affect you:

Each hospital and its providers will be supported by the guidance of the CSC triage committee and its guidelines/algorithm. Case-by-case decisions will be made within the pre-established framework for how to provide care for patients when there are not enough resources. This framework may be different based on the department you work in: emergency department clinicians may be faced with stricter parameters

for admitting a patient or discharging to home, inpatient medical units may have tightened criteria for transferring a patient to the ICU, and ICU staff may see new guidance on which patients initially receive, and continue to receive ventilator support. Patient transfers to other hospitals may also be deemed necessary on a more frequent basis, both into and out of your hospital, as the health system looks to utilize all available resources across the state.

What you can do now to prepare for crisis standards of care:

The health care community in Colorado is doing everything it possibly can to stave off a scenario in which crisis standards of care must be activated. That said, health care providers on the front lines can prepare for such a circumstance by familiarizing themselves with their organization’s triage committee and the care parameters it has established. In addition, health care providers should discuss advance care planning with patients in the event they are faced with a critical resource shortage that requires withdrawal of life support machines and/or therapies. Health care providers should encourage patients to discuss and complete a medical durable power of attorney document, which provides a voice for the patient during times of decisional incapacity.

For more information on the Colorado Crisis Standards of Care Plan, visit www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/colorado-crisis-standards-care.

