How can I obtain personal protective equipment?

Per the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), physicians and other health care professionals who cannot obtain personal protective equipment (PPE) or other emergency supplies through their regular vendor and have exhausted other channels, such as other practices or facilities with PPE to spare, can submit a request for state-acquired PPE. Community physicians can request PPE for their practice, group, or office by completing the Texas Medical Association’s PPE Needs Assessment Request. (TMA members, and nonmembers with TMA website accounts, can log in using their TMA credentials. Others can create a new account.) Only one health care professional or staff member should fill out the form for each practice.

These physician requests will be aggregated and sent to Regional Advisory Councils (RACs), which will allocate PPE for counties in their region based upon need. County medical societies will have access to all PPE requests in their area and will fairly distribute to physicians the PPE they receive from RACs. TMA designed a prioritization system that will streamline allocation for societies. They can opt in to use this tool.

What is a Regional Advisory Council?

Texas established Regional Advisory Councils as part of the statewide trauma system to ensure multijurisdictional transportation of patients to the closest trauma facility in the most efficient time possible. Texas has 22 RACs that each oversee trauma systems within a unique geographic area in the state.

RACs work with regional stakeholders such as hospitals, physicians, nurses, emergency medical service providers, rehabilitation facilities, dispatchers, and various community groups. Over time, the RACs, which statutorily are also part of the state’s emergency response system, have taken on additional functions. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, DSHS tasked RACs with distributing PPE. DSHS contracts with each RAC, and each must follow DSHS stipulations, including how to distribute state-acquired PPE. RACs that acquire PPE through other channels may have some discretion over how to distribute it.

What is a Hospital Preparedness Program?

Through a competitive grant process, DSHS selected eight RACs as Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP) leads. These RACs receive additional funding provided via federal health preparedness and response programs. HPP RACs are tasked with forming and coordinating health care coalitions among the 22 RACs to improve regional responses to health emergencies. One task for the COVID-19 response is to manage the distribution of PPE. To determine which HPP your RAC falls into, refer to the DSHS contact information or TMA’s county medical society-to-RAC/HPP crosswalk.

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1  DSHS. Information for Hospitals & Healthcare Professionals.
Who can request PPE through TMA’s system?
TMA members and nonmembers can submit requests for PPE. All practices in the community are eligible, regardless of size, except for those owned by or affiliated with a hospital. Practices affiliated with a hospital receive PPE from that facility; hospitals have their own supply chains in addition to still receiving state-acquired PPE.

Where is this PPE from?
The Texas Division of Emergency Management acquires PPE from various manufacturers within the global supply chain.

How much will the PPE cost?
The PPE you receive through this request and distribution system will be free. The PPE is acquired by the state and is meant for emergency purposes.

Why has Texas chosen to use the RACs to distribute PPE?
As noted above, RACs are a component of the state’s emergency response system. For purposes of PPE allocation, the HPPs are a point of contact for physicians, hospitals, long-term care facilities, and other health care professionals who have not been able to acquire PPE on their own. DSHS has contact information for each HPP.
The HPPs are contracted to distribute protective equipment and supplies from the Strategic National Stockpile as well as PPE acquired by the state. HPPs and RACs also may receive donations from other sources. Additionally, HPPs will help distribute test kits.

How do I identify my RAC?
To find your RAC, refer to TMA's county medical society-to-RAC/HPP crosswalk. Further contact information for RACs is available on the DSHS RAC webpage. For HPP contact information, you can also refer to this DSHS RAC-to-HPP guide. See also this map detailing every county’s RAC assignment.

At one point, I was told to complete a STAR or PPE form provided by my RAC. Do I still need to do that?
No. The Texas Division of Emergency Management coordinates requests for PPE using the State of Texas Assistance Request (STAR). Large health care facilities and hospitals will continue to use this traditional system. TMA worked with the state to create a separate process for community physicians to request PPE.

How is PPE prioritized?
A portion of the state-acquired PPE will be allocated for community physicians. Because supplies remain limited, the amount distributed will be proportional to regional needs. As the state obtains PPE, it will be sent to HPPs, which in coordination with regional RACs, will distribute supplies to county medical societies. Each county society will then distribute at the practice level. While needs and capacity of each county society will vary, TMA has developed a prioritization tool that a county society can use to equitably allocate PPE. This tool, vetted by TMA's COVID-19 Task Force and physician leadership, considers various criteria of a practice’s PPE usage and factors such as likelihood of physicians’ encounters with COVID-19-positive patients.
What if I get only a few days’ supply of PPE? How often can I submit the TMA PPE Needs Assessment Request?

If no PPE is available when the practice submits a request, the request will remain active. However, given the current shortage of PPE, HPPs cannot guarantee how often PPE will be sent to a county medical society. When the county society receives PPE, previously submitted request forms will be considered. Since the request form is based on usage and not a specified request amount, the amount of PPE distribution will vary based on the total amount the county society received.

Since each county medical society may determine the frequency of PPE distribution that best support its physician population, the timing of how often a request will need to be submitted may vary. If the county society chooses to use the TMA prioritization tool, each requestor should receive a proportion of the supply at hand.

If my PPE request is not filled, will it remain active, or do I need to submit another request?

If no PPE is available when you submit a request, the request will remain active. However, given the current shortage of PPE, HPPs cannot guarantee PPE will become available.

Who tests the PPE for quality control?

Quality control for PPE is the responsibility of the manufacturer. To ensure safety, physicians are encouraged to test the quality of the PPE using this guidance:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) information on standard respirator testing procedures,
- CDC information on health care respiratory protection resources, and
- U.S. Department of Labor information on how to check for counterfeit and altered respirators.

I know of a PPE manufacturer. How can I connect it with the state?

DSHS recommends that all manufacturers interested in selling PPE register with the state. Send this state procurement form to the manufacturer.

I have been contacted by a company selling PPE but am unfamiliar with it. How can I verify if the product is legitimate?

Take precautions with unfamiliar manufacturers, as it is possible the product or organization is fraudulent. On April 13, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) warned of rapidly emerging fraud related to medical supplies and PPE procurement. The FBI’s press release details risk factors and mitigation recommendations. In addition, some manufacturers are beginning to produce PPE without U.S. Food and Drug Administration or National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) approval, to avoid a drawn-out period of procurement and vetting.

General respirator products that NIOSH approves have an approval label on or within the packaging of the PPE or sometimes on the PPE itself. For NIOSH-approved N95 filtering face piece respirators, required labeling printed on the respirator must display the NIOSH name, approval number, filter designations, lot number, and model number. You can verify that your respirator approvals are valid by checking the NIOSH Certified Equipment List. NIOSH recommends using gowns and gloves in accordance with the type of procedure taking place but does not label these materials with an approval number.

For more information about PPE, see TMA’s infection control and PPE webpage.