



In Reporting on Oil Spill, Limits Persist on Media Access in the Gulf

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Health Correspondent Betty Ann Bowser and I spent last week reporting the [health impact](#) of the oil spill in Plaquemines Parish -- Louisiana's southernmost parish, where the Mississippi River meets the Gulf of Mexico.

During that time local officials and media contacts at the Unified Command Center Operations were mostly helpful in finding answers to our questions and providing us information about scheduled media boat tours of the cleanup operations (even if it did take sometimes take them a few days to get back to us).

But there's one roadblock that we encountered that mystified us -- and, we understand, many other journalists. It has been virtually impossible to get any information about the federal mobile medical unit in the fishing town of Venice, La. The glorified double-wide trailer sits on a spit of newly graveled land known to some as the "BP compound." Ringed with barbed wire-topped chain link fencing, it's tightly restricted by police and private security guards.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services set up the facility on May 31. According to a [press release](#), the medical unit is staffed by "a medical team from the HHS National Disaster Medical System -- a doctor, two nurses, two emergency medical technician paramedics (EMT-P) and a pharmacist."

For over two weeks, my NewsHour colleagues and I reached out to media contacts at HHS, the U.S. Coast Guard and everyone listed as a possible media contact for BP, in an attempt to visit the unit and get a general sense of how many people were being treated there, who they were and what illnesses they had. We got nowhere. It was either "access denied," or no response at all. It was something that none of us had ever encountered while covering a disaster. We're usually at some point provided access to the health services being offered by the federal government.

We tried the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals who told us to talk to HHS. HHS said they couldn't provide us access and said they would get back to us about our questions.

We reached out to local parish officials, who told us to talk to Unified Command Center Operations. Unified Command Center Operations told us to talk to HHS... noticing a pattern here?

NewsHour colleagues -- correspondent Spencer Michaels and Producer Joanne Elgart Jennings -- [warned us](#) of the wild goose chase they were sent on two weeks ago while they were in Venice trying to find out what goes on there.

We found we weren't the only ones. Fox News' Dr. Manny Alvarez was also [denied access](#) to the unit.

In their May 31 press release, HHS said the mobile unit "will integrate with the local medical community to triage and provide basic care for responders and residents concerned about the health effects of the oil spill," but we heard from local fisherman Acy Cooper, vice president of the Louisiana Shrimp Association, and others in Venice that only those contracted by BP for cleanup operations are allowed to seek treatment at the mobile unit. Cooper also told us anyone seeking treatment was pre-screened by a private company hired by BP -- Acadian Ambulance Services.

After a week of repeatedly calling HHS media contacts, I finally got some answers from Ron Burger, the Medical Unit Operations Chief for HHS's National Disaster Medical System, who spoke with me by phone from Venice. He confirmed that only responders were being treated at the mobile unit. When I asked him why residents weren't being seen there he responded: "I can't answer that" and he added that he didn't know if any residents had in fact requested treatment at the facility. We couldn't independently confirm any accounts that we had heard that residents were turned away.

When I asked Burger if he agreed with comments we've heard from some government officials as well as professionals who have been involved in disaster response that this setup is unusual, he said that this entire operation is run differently because "we are operating under the national contingency plan" which puts the U.S. Coast Guard in charge of the response operation, as well as BP, instead of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

He confirmed that Acadian had been contracted to set up an infirmary near the mobile medical unit and their staff indeed saw responders first. Burger estimated that out of every 30 to 40 responders that present at Acadian, only about 10 are referred to HHS medical staff. He told me that most people come for basic primary care -- a band-aid -- and others for illnesses that you "normally see in a community where people are gathered together" like runny noses, upper respiratory infections or gastro-intestinal problems like diarrhea. But Burger said he didn't think those health issues were related to oil spill exposure and the patients were generally back on the cleanup job within a day or two. He said he didn't know what types of illnesses the Acadian Ambulance Services team was seeing. Representatives of Acadian said they were unable to provide us with any information.

We were able to get a firsthand account of the unit from Dr. Irwin Redlener - president of the Children's Health Fund and Director of Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness. He and two other senior officials from his group gained the much sought-after look inside the facility on Monday, June 21 -- the fact that Dr. Redlener was a practicing physician and showed his credentials from the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals from his prior outreach work in the state after Hurricane Katrina seemed to make a difference. We trailed him with our cameras until we were turned away.

Listen to Dr. Redlener's observations below.

Video available on PBS NewsHour site: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2010/06/access-hard-to-come-by-in-reporting-on-health-in-the-gulf.html>