

Esper Orders Navy to Ready Hospital Ships to Take Pressure Off U.S. Hospitals



The hospital ship USNS Comfort, which is currently undergoing maintenance. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Morgan K. Nall

ARLINGTON, Va. – The secretary of defense said March 18 that he has ordered the U.S. Navy to prepare its two hospital ships for activation to take pressure off the nation's hospitals battling the COVID-19 virus pandemic.

At a Pentagon news conference, Secretary Mark T. Esper referred to the two hospital ships – USNS Comfort and USNS Mercy, based at Norfolk, Virginia, and San Diego, respectively – operated by the Military Sealift Command.

“The Comfort is undergoing maintenance and the Mercy is at port,” Esper said. “We’ve already given orders to the Navy a few days ago to lean forward, in terms of getting them ready to deploy.”

Esper said the capabilities of the two ships, like military field hospitals, are focused on trauma.

“They don’t have necessarily the segregated spaces you need to deal with infectious diseases,” he explained. “And so one of the ways by which you could use either field hospitals, the hospital ships or things in between is to take the pressure off of civilian hospitals when it comes to trauma cases [and] open up civilian hospital rooms for infectious diseases.”

Esper said that a bigger challenge than activating the hospital ships is staffing the ships with medical

professionals.

“All those doctors and nurses either come from our medical treatment facilities or they come from the Reserves, which means civilians,” he said. “And, so what we’ve got to be very conscious of and careful of as we call up these units and use them to support the states, [is] that we aren’t robbing Peter to pay Paul, so to speak. So, what I don’t want to do is take Reservists from a hospital where they are needed just to put them on a ship to take them somewhere else where they are needed. So, we’ve got to be very conscious of that. As I’ve spoken to a couple governors today, we talked a little bit about that, and I think people are beginning understand what that trade-off means.”