

The Medical Reserve Corps: Volunteers Making a Difference

The Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) was formed in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the anthrax bioterrorism events that followed in October. The events of 9/11 motivated a significant number of medical and public health professionals to spontaneously arrive at the scene and volunteer their time and services in the disaster response efforts. However, their presence became extremely problematic for the emergency management agencies because there were no mechanisms to: 1) ensure their identities, licensure, and qualifications; 2) address liability issues; 3) supervise and manage unaffiliated volunteers; and 4) handle logistics such as housing and meals.¹ As a result, most of these highly skilled health professional volunteers were turned away. Just a few weeks later anthrax-laced letters were mailed to news media and Congressional offices, requiring a mass medication-dispensing response. These and subsequent events highlighted how human-caused and natural disasters create the need for communities to be able to rapidly mobilize public health services and underscored the necessity for a national coordinated system to utilize qualified volunteers.^{1,2}

In 2002 President George W. Bush created the USA Freedom Corps to bring together existing volunteer service organizations, including AmeriCorps, SeniorCorps, the Peace Corps and the newly created Citizen Corps. Citizen Corps serves as a national network for volunteers dedicated to preparing their communities for terrorism, crime, and disasters of all kinds.¹ The MRC, a specialized component of the Citizen Corps, was launched in July 2002 with the specific aim to supplement the existing community-based public health and emergency response by promoting the

local identification, recruitment, training, and activation of medical and public health professionals.³ Each MRC unit is led by a Unit Director or Coordinator who matches community needs with volunteer capabilities. Local MRC leaders are also responsible for building partnerships, ensuring the sustainability of the local unit, and managing resources. Partnerships typically include local public health and emergency response agencies, community businesses, schools and neighboring MRCs.² The Office of the Civilian Volunteer Medical Reserve Corps, headquartered in the office of the U.S. Surgeon General, provides support, technical assistance and supervision to MRC units.² As of May 2014, there are 995 MRC units and more than 208,000 volunteers throughout the nation.³

MRC units vary in size and structure and are most often housed within local health departments, but can also be organized by universities, hospitals, and community or faith-based organizations.⁴ Medical volunteers include nurses, physicians, pharmacists, dentists and veterinarians. Nonclinical volunteers such as chaplains, interpreters, legal advisors, and others fill logistical and support roles.² Volunteer requirements are determined by the local MRC unit and often include education to enhance their knowledge of public health preparedness and response. Depending on the community's needs and on available skills and expertise, volunteers may be called upon to provide health services in emergency shelters, staff point-of-distribution clinics for mass vaccination or prophylactic medications, assist with surveillance or case investigation activities, staff emergency call centers, or provide community health education.¹ During a federal disaster MRC volunteers may be "federalized" (deployed by the federal government and made temporary

federal employees) to provide assistance nationwide, as was the case in 2005 during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.²

The Philadelphia Medical Reserve Corps

The Philadelphia MRC, founded in 2005, is housed within the City's Department of Public Health and has over 1800 registered volunteers. Volunteers must be over 18 years of age, pass a background and professional license check, and attend a New Volunteer Training. The core training for new volunteers centers on mass dispensing and mass vaccination – the provision of medical countermeasures to potentially hundreds of thousands of residents during a disease outbreak or bioterrorism incident. In such an emergency, thousands of medical and non-medically trained volunteers would be necessary to support Points-of-Dispensing (PODs) operations at local gymnasiums and community centers. Annual POD exercises allow MRC volunteers to provide flu vaccinations to thousands of Philadelphia first responders.

Philadelphia MRC volunteers are also trained to run medical clinics located within City-run evacuation shelters. At these clinics, teams of volunteers provide medical care to residents displaced by hurricanes, power outages, and other disasters. In recent years MRC volunteers have worked at clinics during Hurricane Sandy and in Chester County during the winter storms of 2014.

Within the last year, Philadelphia MRC volunteers have assisted at high-profile special events such as the *Made in America* festival and the Philadelphia Marathon. Volunteers work alongside Philadelphia Fire Department paramedics to provide medical care to athletes and bystanders.

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The MRC also serves as surge capacity in the case of a mass casualty incident, such as the 2013 Boston Marathon. At the 2013 Philadelphia Marathon, the MRC deployed 35 volunteers to the finish line medical tent, assisting patients with complaints including lacerations, severe dehydration, sprains, and cardiac arrhythmias. At a recent half marathon in Philadelphia, five MRC volunteers were the first to respond to a patient in cardiac arrest, performing CPR and directing EMS resources to the scene. The patient survived after being transported to a hospital.

Other potential duties for MRC volunteers include assisting the Medical Examiner's Office during a mass fatality incident, assisting emergency call centers, outbreak investigation, logistics and communications, behavioral health support, and performing medical screenings. Volunteers are often asked to act as "victims" for mass casualty drills. Exercises are conducted regularly in conjunction with partner response agencies such as the American Red Cross, MRCs from surrounding counties, the Philadelphia Office of Emergency Management, the Philadelphia Police Department, and the Philadelphia Fire Department.

Nurses are the most common type of Philadelphia MRC volunteers, followed closely by health professional students. Students are afforded many opportunities during drills, exercises, and real deployments for hands-on experience that can enrich their classroom learning. At a recent mass vaccination exercise, one medical student volunteer administered over 100 flu vaccinations in fewer than three hours, while under the supervision of a physician. Monthly educational seminars often include free continuing education credits and cover topics ranging from psychological first aid to radiological emergencies to working with children in disasters.

Because of their work in the community, MRC units need licensed medical professional volunteers and unlicensed administrative and support volunteers with a broad range of skills and expertise. These individuals may be students in training, those in active clinical practice or retired. A registered volunteer can be as involved in the program as they wish. No volunteer is obligated to deploy to any emergency. It is precisely for this reason that having a large MRC is crucial to the City, as many volunteers may have work and family

responsibilities that render them unable to assist during a particular emergency.

The MRC is now recognized as one of the leading volunteer programs in the United States.⁴ For more information about The Medical Reserve Corps visit <http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov/>. To find the nearest MRC unit to a specific geographic location visit <http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov/VolunteerFldr/AboutVolunteering>, and enter a zip code. To register as a member of the Philadelphia MRC visit www.phila.gov/mrc or contact the Philadelphia MRC Coordinator at mrc@phila.gov or 215-685-6496.

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