

Medical Reserve Corps and Red Cross Partnerships



Partnerships are at the heart of disaster response and recovery. No agency can succeed by responding to a catastrophe alone. The responses to Hurricanes Gustav, Ike, Katrina, and Rita and to many other local and regional emergencies have highlighted the need to establish complementary relationships between organizations both at the national and local levels. Preexisting partnerships and defined relationships allow all agencies involved to operate with common principles, guidelines, and goals that are established long before a hurricane makes landfall, an earthquake damages a town, or a terrorist attack strikes a community.

On April 2, 2009, leaders of the American Red Cross (ARC) and the Office of the Civilian Medical Reserve Corps (OCVMRC) signed a Joint Letter to Red Cross chapters and Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) unit leaders in an effort to promote the coordination of planning, preparation, and response efforts. The relationship between the national coordinating bodies of the Red Cross and the MRC paves the way for communities to create complementary plans, trainings, and efforts between their local Red Cross chapters and MRC units.

The Joint Letter identified three ways for MRC and Red Cross volunteers to work together:

- MRC volunteers working as Red Cross volunteers;
- MRC volunteers working alongside Red Cross volunteers (e.g., shelters, emergency aid stations); and
- Red Cross volunteers working as MRC volunteers.

These approaches are not mutually exclusive nor are they the only way for MRC units to partner with Red Cross chapters. Many MRC units already have existing relationships with their local Red Cross chapter. The Joint Letter between the OCVMRC and ARC does

not change any existing relationships that local units and chapters may have already established. Instead, it promotes and facilitates new relationships between MRC units and Red Cross chapters.

One of the first MRC units to have an official memorandum of understanding (MOU) with a Red Cross chapter was the Middle Tennessee Medical Reserve Corps (MTMRC) in Nashville. The MTMRC has about 1,200 members, of which over 60 percent are licensed healthcare professionals. The MRC unit director, Steven Guillot, says that one of the biggest challenges that his unit faced was an initial animosity between the two organizations. "The Medical Reserve Corps was seen as a threat," he says. Overcoming this obstacle and having the two organizations realize that they were complementary, not competing, has allowed the partnership to thrive.

The MTMRC has since enjoyed a successful relationship with the Nashville chapter of the Red Cross, and now the two organizations frequently work together. For example, the MTMRC provides staffing for Red Cross aid stations, clinics, and shelters. The two organizations coordinate on a weekly basis and deploy or respond about every two weeks. The organizations have deployed together during tornadoes, floods, music events, and sporting events. To avoid double-counting, MRC volunteers are trained to work at Red Cross facilities but are not listed as Red Cross volunteers.

Guillot offers two tips for MRC units looking to partner with their Red Cross chapter. First, make sure both organizations see working with one other as a benefit, rather than a competition. Second, the relationship needs to be "worked and tested" on a regular basis. An MOU that is only on paper will not be effective. Guillot states, "To avoid us being considered a first responder... there is a 24-hour delay built into the MOU." He cites the growing responsibilities of the MRC within his community as both a success and a challenge.

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Another MRC unit that has had a successful relationship with its local Red Cross chapter is the Southeast Wisconsin MRC (SE WI MRC), led by MRC unit coordinator Linda Botts. The SE WI MRC's relationship with its local Red Cross chapter began about two years ago, but it recently signed an MOU to formalize the partnership. Botts says the biggest reason for the formation of the partnership is "to keep volunteers active and more involved." For example, MRC volunteers staff shelters, deploy nurses and mental health professionals with the Red Cross to disasters statewide, and crosstrain with Red Cross volunteers.

Recently, the SE WI MRC worked with its Red Cross chapter to create a special-needs shelter. Red Cross provided training for MRC volunteers in special-needs shelter operations, while the SE WI MRC provided the specialized medical staffing needed to run the shelter.

One of the biggest challenges cited by Botts was the recent restructuring that has occurred at many Red Cross chapters. According to Botts, "The Red Cross staff are wearing many hats" and have been "understaffed and very busy." However, the partnership with the SE WI MRC has allowed the Red Cross to continue operating and responding to disasters.

Botts offers some advice to MRC units who are looking to partner with Red Cross chapters: "Be flexible and be open." Once the Red Cross chapter understands that the MRC "wants to help and work together, successful partnerships can grow."

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Resources

To download the template for an MOU between local MRC units and Red Cross chapters, please visit www.naccho.org/topics/emergency/mrc/resources/upload/mou_local_arc-mrc-1.pdf.

To view the Joint Letter between the OCVMRC and ARC, please visit www.naccho.org/topics/emergency/mrc/resources/upload/joint_memo_arc-mrc-1.pdf.

To view the Middle Tennessee Medical Reserve Corps-Red Cross MOU, please visit www.naccho.org/topics/emergency/mrc/resources/upload/mtmrc_red_cross_mou.pdf.

Steven Guillot can be contacted at stephen.guillot@vanderbilt.edu; Linda Botts can be contacted at lbotts@waukeshacounty.gov.

To share your MRC unit's experiences and lessons learned, fill out the information-sharing form at www.naccho.org/topics/emergency/mrc/resources/mrcshare.cfm.

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