

Medical Reserve Corps, front and center

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Special to the Advocate

Next Thursday, residents of Tewksbury and surrounding towns will have the first opportunity this winter to learn about a health care initiative that's been sweeping the nation since July 2002. On January 26 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the police department, attendees can learn how a network of volunteers – including their neighbors – has been involved in the Medical Reserve Corps to help local communities in case of disaster.

The national MRC program, which reports to the office of the U.S. Surgeon General, was launched in response to the events of September 11, 2001. Areas impacted by terrorist attacks had been flooded by well-meaning responders, yet there was no mechanism at the time to harness their talents. It wasn't clear which care providers had certain skills, though most hadn't been trained in disasters. They weren't familiar with procedures that would keep them safe and allow them to work smoothly with the existing agencies. There was also no way to coordinate their energies in saving lives.

The MRC system issued three-year demonstration grants to encourage preparedness efforts by ordinary citizens – medical and non-medical, full-time and retired – to protect their own communities. Members could train together and respond quickly to events in their area, because they worked or lived nearby.

Today there are 350 MRC units across the country, comprised of over 60,000 volunteers. Tewksbury is one of seven towns with a contingent of members in the Upper Merrimack Valley unit. The other UMV communities are Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Lowell, Tyngsboro, and Westford. (The host agency is the Westford Board of Health.)

Volunteers from the Upper Merrimack Valley MRC have served in the gulf and at Otis to help the victims of hurricane Katrina. In the Lowell area, members have supported numerous flu clinics, participated in training and drills, staffed health fairs and blood pressure clinics, and generally offered their time to assist others in need.

The UMV MRC recruited its first members in June 2004, and now has 266 volunteers. Its mission is to provide service in case of public health emergencies (such as disease outbreaks), mass casualty incidents (where large numbers of people are at risk of injury, perhaps needing temporary shelters as for a hurricane), and community service activities (including programs for healthier living).

Immediately after the first members completed basic disaster training, their skills were put to use. Concerns about a shortage of flu vaccine in November 2004 prompted many communities to set up inoculation clinics, as soon as that year's vaccine supplies were distributed.

The Tewksbury Board of Health used UMV MRC volunteers for the first time, staffing phones to schedule residents for their shots, and screening callers to ensure that high-risk

patients were accommodated. Not only did the use of volunteers save money for the town, their involvement streamlined the registration process and reassured anxious residents.

Tom Carbone, Tewksbury's director of public health, encourages involvement in the program. "The MRC is designed to offer support to all public health programs in times of need," says Carbone. "This is an excellent opportunity for residents to help their neighbors, and an important resource as we make preparations for emergencies."

Anyone who sincerely wants to help in times of a crisis is welcome. In the same way that a hospital needs non-medical support – accountants to handle finances, administrators to manage records – disasters can draw on a full range of skills. In the case of a pandemic disease, for example, hundreds of local volunteers would be needed to staff an emergency dispensing clinic. Volunteers could include medical workers to provide vaccines, others to greet and register patients, and many other roles.

Tewksbury residents such as Arlene Sullivan, an advance practice registered nurse, felt compelled to join because they wanted to be empowered in case of a disaster, by helping in their own community.

"When I first saw the notice about information sessions on the Medical Reserve Corps, I knew it was something I just had to do," says Sullivan. "Anyone affiliated with health care feels a sense of obligation to assist in a disaster. As the terrorist attacks of 9-11 and our country's recent natural disasters have taught us, this can happen in our own backyard, at any time." Sullivan acknowledges that disasters have raised security concerns as well. Thus she was interested in joining a recognized entity and serving as part of a team.

"The camaraderie and networking are astounding," Sullivan explains. While her full-time job as an occupational health nurse limits her availability for events that the unit offers, she feels appreciated nevertheless, especially for her willingness to help her neighbors in case of a disaster.

One of the many reasons spontaneous volunteers who "just showed up" to help in New York City after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 were turned away was the inability to check their credentials. Rescue agencies had no way to verify whether the hundreds of would-be volunteers who claimed to be medical professionals possessed the certifications they claimed. It wasn't clear whether they had sanctions against their licenses, or could be trusted to provide care.

"Before I joined the MRC, I had always assumed I could volunteer in an emergency," recalls Lee Toth, a Tewksbury resident and registered nurse. "It never occurred to me that I would need to be checked to see if I was who I claimed to be. So much expertise would be wasted while trying to verify credentials during a difficult time." Toth discovered the importance of training to ensure that a group of volunteers would be ready to deal with

the unexpected. "I suggest that anyone who could be available in such a situation take steps to ensure they are properly prepared," adds Toth. "I'm glad I did!"

Some Tewksbury residents found it reassuring to be identified in terms of the skills they could offer, even if they were not able to respond the first time they were called. "I think it's very important to be prepared," says JoAnn McAllister, an RNC. "When an emergency strikes, that's not the time to try and figure out what to do and how I can help."

Having taken Red Cross disaster training through the MRC, McAllister was asked to help with relief efforts after last year's devastating hurricanes. "While I had to refuse due to a family illness, it felt good to realize that I was needed." More important, says McAllister, "I can never express what a great feeling it was to receive a call after Katrina, saying that I was qualified to help. I take comfort in knowing that if the time comes, I'll be part of the solution, and not the problem."

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When and Where:

The first of four opportunities this winter to learn about the MRC takes place in Tewksbury. All are scheduled on Thursday evenings from 7 to 9 p.m.:

1. Jan. 26, Police Dept. Training Room, 918 Main St., Tewksbury
2. Feb. 16, Clark Aud, LGH, 295 Varnum Ave., Lowell
3. Mar. 2, Town Hall, 25 Bryants Lane, Tyngsboro
4. Mar. 9, Fire Dept. Training Room, 488 Pleasant St., Dracut

Advanced registration is appreciated though not required. Please call the coordinator, Nancy Burns, at 978-399-2549; send e-mail to NBurns@westford.mec.edu; or sign up through the web site, www.umvmrc.org. Two continuing education hours have been requested for EMTs who attend.