

Medical Reserve Corps
Office of the Surgeon General
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services



Technical Assistance Series
***Special Topics: Volunteer
Retention and Recognition***



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www.medicalreservecorps.gov

Medical Reserve Corps Technical Assistance Series



Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

As part of its effort to support the growth and sustainability of **Medical Reserve Corps (MRC)** units across the United States, the MRC Program Office—headquartered in the office of the U.S. Surgeon General—has developed a series of technical assistance documents. Each one addresses topics considered important for MRC units. The Technical Assistance Series is available at: www.medicalreservecorps.gov. Some of the topics addressed are as follows:

- **Getting Started: A Guide for Local Leaders**

Each MRC functions differently. The first step in forming a unit is to carefully evaluate your local situation. It is important to secure a broad base of support from others in your community. Identifying and acquiring resources is essential to meeting your MRC's operational needs.

- **Organizing an MRC Unit: Operational Components and the Coordinator's Role**

The coordinator's main job is matching community needs for emergency medical response and public health initiatives with local volunteer capabilities. Establishing and sustaining the unit's internal organization also is a priority.

- **Coordinating With Your Local Response Partners**

MRC units supplement a community's existing emergency medical response capabilities and public health infrastructure. Coordinating with local response partners is critical, as is developing and nurturing a broad network of partners. Conducting exercises with response partners will be necessary, as will close communications during and after an emergency or engagement.

- **Developing Volunteer Relationships and Capabilities**

Developing volunteer capabilities is a key mandate for every MRC unit. The process begins by advertising your MRC unit to the community. As volunteers are screened and matched with existing needs, they must be informed of any risks associated with their MRC activities. They also will require additional training.

- **Establishing and Maintaining Your MRC Unit's Organization**

A well-run organization is the foundation for every successful MRC unit. Information must be tracked and updated for volunteers and local partners. Policies must be established and followed. Operating funds must be solicited, along with leveraged public and private sector resources. Planning—strategically, financially, and operationally—is an essential, ongoing function of the MRC unit's administrators.

- **Special Topics**

Some of the more complex aspects of operating an MRC unit are related to differences in local laws and the evolving technical nature of the MRC's work. For example, legal liability is something every unit member should know about. Another special topic of interest to MRC units is sustainability. Special publications address these and other emerging topics.



The **Medical Reserve Corps** program is sponsored by the U.S. Surgeon General's Office in cooperation with the White House's **USA Freedom Corps** and the Department of Homeland Security's **Citizen Corps**.





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The information in this publication is intended as a general guide to establishing and operating a Medical Reserve Corps unit. The MRC Program Office encourages communities to consider alternative approaches that may offer a better fit for their local circumstances, resources, and needs. The MRC Program Office welcomes learning from these successes.

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Special Topics: Volunteer Retention and Recognition

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Volunteer Retention and Recognition

Marty Atherton, Families First



Volunteer Retention and Recognition

One challenge of managing a program in which volunteers are utilized primarily in emergencies is that volunteers may lose interest during the periods between emergency activations. This creates a “revolving door” in which the unit may lose seasoned volunteers as fast as it can recruit new ones. There are many ways to approach this challenge. Many Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) units use training and exercises to keep volunteers engaged. Although these methods are beneficial to the unit, they demand time and resources that may not always be available and may require more time from your volunteers than they can provide.

There are other ways of building retention and recognition in your program. The most common method may be the most challenging: making the volunteer experience a positive from start to finish.

Creating a Positive Volunteer Experience From Start to Finish

There are many ways you can ensure that volunteers have a quality experience with your unit. Examine your unit from the volunteer’s perspective and consider the aspects of the volunteer experience that might affect your participation.

To optimize the volunteer experience:

1. **Ensure a good first impression** by handling the application and screening process in an efficient and professional manner.
2. **Screen carefully** to ensure your volunteers suit the positions they are filling and that they understand the commitment they are making.
3. **Create a course of required training** that the volunteer experiences as helpful and relevant. Offer optional training that enhances the volunteer’s experience and assists them with their current employment (if applicable).
4. **Demonstrate professional accountability** regarding establishing and following policies that reduce the overall risk of harm for the volunteer and others.
5. **Ensure that the volunteers feel well utilized** and that they are making a satisfying contribution. Some volunteers may only wish to serve during an emergency, while others may wish to be involved in ongoing public health initiatives throughout the year (see below).
6. **Provide for the volunteers’ emotional needs** during and subsequent to utilization. Give them the opportunity to participate in after-action activities—show them the MRC’s commitment to caring for volunteers’ well-being by considering their feedback seriously.
7. **Show the volunteers** that MRC leadership functions as an advocate with local, state, and Federal government to ensure proper legislation and guidelines for extending protections to volunteers engaged in activities that have some known risk.



Understanding Volunteer Motivation

In addition to a positive volunteer experience and an opportunity to make their community safer and healthier, your volunteers may have other, more personal reasons for volunteering.

There are several reasons why people volunteer—these reasons can be loosely grouped into four categories:¹

1. Achievement
2. Affiliation
3. Recognition
4. Power/Leadership

The majority of volunteers have a complex combination of reasons that they volunteer; only a few volunteers apply to only one category. Ensuring that the volunteer experience is rewarding means ensuring there are opportunities where these needs can be met.

Retaining the Achievement-motivated Volunteer—Ensure your unit’s volunteers know what they have achieved, while updating them on what the volunteers, the unit, and the national MRC program have achieved. Maintain records of utilization statistics, and remind your volunteers that they are the reason for the unit’s successes.

Retaining the Affiliation-motivated Volunteer—This volunteer needs to know that he or she is part of a bigger organization—the opportunity to train, exercise, and assist at community events as part of the MRC will be attractive to this volunteer. When communicating with volunteers, inform them that their MRC unit is part of a national movement sponsored by the Office of the Surgeon General. Also, take the opportunity to celebrate the successes of other MRC units in your area. The affiliation-motivated volunteers will enjoy the opportunity to discuss the MRC and demonstrate their affiliation in the community—if you can give them something that identifies them as MRC members, these volunteers will wear it publicly.

Retaining the Recognition-motivated Volunteer—Although annual awards dinners are not a poor way to thank volunteers, the real work of volunteer recognition occurs daily. There are various ways to recognize volunteers’ contributions, ranging from the simple, personal “thank you,” to more public forms of recognition such as newspaper articles, community awards, notes to their families and/or employers, etc. Not all volunteers want to be publicly recognized, but each volunteer needs to know that he or she is valued by the organization (see Recognition and Appreciation, below).

Retaining the Power/Leadership-motivated Volunteer—There should be opportunities for volunteers to assume leadership roles in the unit. When appropriate, delegate responsibilities to volunteers that have appropriate skills and have expressed

¹ Sources: [Motivation and Organizational Climate](#), David C. McClelland and John W. Atkinson, and [The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs](#), Marlene Wilson.



interest in working on new projects—these leadership-motivated volunteers can be your greatest spokespeople if you utilize them well.

Recognition and Appreciation

Volunteer efforts need to be recognized and celebrated, but how you conduct these vary based on the personalities of the individuals in your MRC unit. Some will need more frequent acknowledgement that their contributions make a difference. Others will need explicit recognition even when they find the work satisfying. Some volunteers will not respond well to public recognition, yet they may appreciate recognition of the group to which they belong. Regardless, every effort to achieve public recognition for the work your MRC volunteers have done always is a way to give them additional thanks. Volunteer recognition can range from purely informal contact with volunteers, one-on-one or in groups, where genuine appreciation and interest are expressed. Conversely, more formal recognition ceremonies can feature awards and public statements. You will need to choose the combination of volunteer recognition activities that responds best to the needs of your MRC team members. Examples of recognition activities used by MRC units include:

- Daily Points of Light Awards
- President's Volunteer Service Award
- Resolutions made by elected officials
- Press briefings
- Newspaper articles or advertisements
- Recognition through community awards programs (e.g., those sponsored by local media outlets)

Specific Activities for Keeping Medical Reserve Corps Volunteers Engaged

Community Preparedness

One common expression is that a community is only as prepared as its citizens. Many MRC units are creating a culture of preparedness in their communities through activities such as:

- Safety and preparedness expositions or exhibits at health fairs and other events
- Informational sessions with emergency management professionals
- Press briefings and other public information efforts to disseminate preparedness information

September is National Preparedness Month, an ideal time to involve your MRC unit in community preparedness activities. Visit www.ready.gov/ for more information on community and family preparedness and National Preparedness Month activities.



Public Health and the Surgeon General's Priorities

Housed in the Office of the Surgeon General, the MRC can promote the Surgeon General's priorities. By supporting these efforts, the civilian, volunteer MRC program will simultaneously strengthen the nation's health—one community at a time.

The Surgeon General's priorities are to:

- Increase disease prevention
- Eliminate health disparities
- Strengthen public health preparedness
- Improve health literacy

MRC units nationwide support these priorities through various public health activities such as:

- Health education
- Immunization clinics
- Health screening campaigns
- Participation in events such as Take a Loved One to the Doctor Day
- Participation in community emergency planning efforts

Resources

- Citizen Corps: <http://www.citizencorps.gov/>
- Corporation for National and Community Service Resources: http://nationalserviceresources.org/epicenter/practices/index.php?ep_action=search&search=retention
- Energize Inc. – for Leaders of Volunteers: <http://www.energizeinc.com/>
- Healthfinder's National Health Observances Calendar: <http://www.healthfinder.gov/library/nho/nho.asp>
- Lynch, R., & McCurley, S. (2005). *Keeping Volunteers: A Guide To Retention*. Olympia, WA: Fat Cat Publications.
- MRC Resource Page on Public Health Initiatives: <http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov/resources.asp?mode=BrowseByCategory&category=6>
- MRC Resource Page on Volunteer Relations: <http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov/resources.asp?mode=BrowseByCategory&category=10>
- National Preparedness Month: <http://www.ready.gov/america/npm/index.htm>
- Other National Service Awards: <http://www.pointsoflight.org/awards/awards.cfm>



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- Points of Light Foundation's Volunteer Management Resources: <http://www.pointsoflight.org/resources/>
- President's Volunteer Service Award: <http://www.presidentialserviceawards.gov/>
- Ready.gov: <http://www.ready.gov/america/>
- U.S. Surgeon General's Priorities and the MRC: <http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov/File/Print%20SG%20Priorities%20Layout.pdf>
- VMWeb – the online community for volunteer management: <http://www.vmweb.org/>