

Stay Off the Sidelines

By J. Kent Garman, M.D., M.S., Associate Editor of the CSA Bulletin, Editor of Electronic Media, CSA Past President



When we hear of major disasters—especially those striking close to home—I think most of us, as physicians, instinctively ask, “How can I help?”

This is sometimes easier said than done because practicing medicine in the midst or aftermath of an earthquake, hurricane, or similar event requires some special preparation for the unusual and demanding conditions and challenges that inevitably prevail.

Few of us on the medical staff are bored and idle, so we are rarely looking randomly for new things to do. Sometimes, however, an opportunity like the Medical Reserve Corps does come along, and it feels like the right thing to do for ourselves and others—because in fact that’s exactly what it is.

This issue is much on my mind right now. I just returned from a four-day national meeting, attended by more than 400 MRC leaders in Dallas.

The MRC is a national organization of healthcare professionals and support personnel, sponsored by the Office of the Surgeon General as a community emergency preparedness and public health resource. The program was founded in 2002 after President Bush’s first State of the Union address after September 11, in which he called upon all Americans to volunteer to support our country. It has blossomed to 420 registered units and over 75,000 members. California has 29 MRC units, with six in the Bay Area alone.

MRCs are clearly part of the medical fabric. The Joint Commission for Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations plans to require hospitals to recognize and integrate MRC units into their emergency surge planning. And the MRC, by the way, just won an Innovations Award in Homeland Security from Mitretek Systems and the Ash Institute of Harvard University.

I recently helped organize an MRC unit in San Mateo County that now has more than 50 members. If you live or work in San Mateo County, this MRC could include you, but units in surrounding areas, including Santa Clara County, are or soon will be available for your participation.

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MRCs register, credential, and train healthcare and support volunteers before an emergency strikes. When the ground starts shaking, flu strikes, or the floodwaters rise, it's too late to bring volunteers up to speed. In fact, healthcare volunteers are usually turned away from the front lines at the time of disaster if they have no related emergency services training. As a member of an MRC, however, it is easy to be integrated into an emergency response with local emergency agencies.

Our new local unit is directed and supported by San Mateo County Health Department EMS services. We, as units typically do, work closely and train with local fire and police departments as citizen volunteers, and we also have MRC-specific training targeted to physicians.

Our unit will be activated and deployed to supplement local hospitals and healthcare resources to provide "surge" assistance during local emergency situations or disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, or pandemic flu.

Every MRC volunteer is expected to demonstrate competency in basic disaster planning and preparedness, including an understanding of how MRC units are integrated into an emergency response. Volunteers will also demonstrate competency in mental health strategies for emergencies, procedures for deployment, and specialized subjects appropriate to the volunteer's MRC role and specialty. Web-based training is available for many subjects.

While local service is the primary goal of our MRC unit, there will soon be opportunities to serve nationally with a newly formed "U.S. Public Health Service Auxiliary" under the surgeon general. MRC members may voluntarily upgrade to the national auxiliary by meeting credentialing and training requirements and agreeing to be available for national deployment in times of emergency.

There are other opportunities as well. California is also about to announce a new voluntary registration system for healthcare professionals—the Emergency System for Advance Registration of Volunteer Health Professionals. This program will soon ask physicians and nurses in California to submit registration information, and then their credentials will be verified and placed in a state database for possible activation when disaster strikes. For this program, there is no further training or ongoing participation before a disaster, so this might be an option for those of you who are really stretched for time.

I'm biased, of course, but I would sincerely urge all healthcare providers (physicians, nurses, pharmacists, mental health professionals, physical therapists, paramedics, EMTs, and others) to volunteer for your local MRC

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unit. Nonhealthcare support personnel are also needed to provide logistic, administrative, and other functions, so talk to your non-medical friends and loved ones about having them consider joining, too.

I would especially urge my fellow medical staff members to become involved before the chaos of an emergency leads you to say, "I wish I could do something directly to help." We'll be a better medical staff if more of us become involved in this effort, because we'll become a cadre of colleagues who will be able to function when others, unfortunately, will be sidelined from the main event.

You can find your local MRC unit by going to the Federal MRC Web Site: www.medicalreservecorps.gov. Simply click on "Find MRC Units."

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