



Summer 2009

## UMass Amherst MRC Volunteers Test Readiness for Chemical Release

The UMass Amherst MRC and the local Emergency Management office drew over 300 volunteers for a drill on April 16 at the university's Mullins Center. The drill simulated an accidental ammonia discharge on campus. Ann Becker, UMass Amherst MRC coordinator, took a lead role in coordinating the drill. "While this exercise focused on an ammonia discharge, the importance of this exercise is learning how to properly coordinate MRC volunteers for any mass casualty event," said Ms. Becker.

MRC volunteers were placed in four roles for the event: decontamination, triage, psychological first aid and sheltering. 165 volunteers acted as victims and were bussed into the rear of the Mullins Center. MRC volunteers oversaw the decontamination activities. The "victims" traded their contaminated clothes for red plastic gowns and took a shower. After showering, the victims donned green gowns to signal they were ready for medical attention.

MRC volunteers in charge of triaging met the victims, identified and prioritized medical and mental health needs and directed them to aid stations on the arena floor. After receiving treatment, victims were sent to a shelter area equipped with refreshments and cots. In the shelter area, behavioral health volunteers were trained to address victims' emotional and psychological needs.

This complex exercise included the coordination of dozens of public health and safety agencies. Participating members included the UMass Amherst MRC, UMass police, University Health Services (UHS), Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), the Amherst Fire Department, American Red Cross and other western region MRC units. "The UMass Amherst MRC has been a regional leader in preparing exercises that practice cross-discipline collaboration," said Kathleen Conley Norbut, Hampden County MRC coordinator.

The drill allowed emergency management officials to explore some of the challenges in preparing for and coordinating a response to a mass casualty incident. "One of the more difficult tasks to coordinate on a large scale is determining when a victim needs to be transferred from the care of a non-clinical volunteer to a medical professional



Volunteers wore red gowns to designate themselves as contaminated. 165 volunteers were processed in under two hours.

volunteer, particularly when dealing with psychological first aid," said Ms. Becker. Determining these kinds of protocols can help inform emergency preparedness coordinators of the ratio of clinical to non-clinical volunteers needed in local disaster response. In addition, with so many participating groups, event coordinators had to work hard to clearly spell out the roles for all involved parties. Despite these challenges, the exercise was remarkably efficient for its scale and complexity. All victims were processed within an hour and a half.

Trained evaluators recorded their observations on the drill. Their evaluations were published in a comprehensive report that will help inform the university's ongoing preparedness planning. Mr. Carlson notes, "[This report] will be of assistance, not only for future UMASS drills, but for anyone who wants to undertake such a scenario."

### ★ What is MRC?

The Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) system was founded by the federal government shortly after 9/11. The national system brings together people who have health care skills with citizen volunteers. MRC units are trained and prepared to respond as a team to emergencies in their communities. The members may provide education, outreach and various health services throughout the year.

[www.mamedicalreservecorps.org](http://www.mamedicalreservecorps.org)

## MRC Units Consider Potential Uses for Facebook and Twitter

As new networking and messaging websites rapidly grow in popularity, MRC coordinators are exploring how these new technologies can be used for emergency preparedness. While website tools such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs offer the potential for streamlined, real-time communication and broader outreach, MRC coordinators and emergency management staff must investigate potential drawbacks, as well. Coordinators will have to decide if the benefits will be worth the effort needed to implement these technologies.

In some cases, emergency preparedness agencies and public health offices are already using these technologies. In late April, the CDC used Twitter, a social messaging website, to provide daily updates on the response to the H1N1 virus. The CDC has also uploaded a number of educational videos on the H1N1 virus on YouTube. The state maintained an active presence on the internet as well. Through Massachusetts DPH twitter account, the state posted links to its regularly updated blog, "Commonwealth Conversations," as well as podcasts on various public health topics. Locally, the Amherst public health office maintains both a blog and Twitter account that keep interested followers up to date on upcoming trainings and the local response to the H1N1 virus.

Keith Carlson, the Amherst MRC unit leader, recently led a training for Western Massachusetts MRC coordinators that focused on using Twitter and blog accounts as communication tools. As part of the training, unit coordinators were given a tutorial on how to register an account for their MRC on Twitter. Users register accounts on Twitter that allow them the ability to post messages on a user-specific web page. As registered users, MRC leaders have the ability to post short messages (with a 140 character limit). Users may also subscribe to other user accounts, such as the CDC Twitter account, and receive alerts when these accounts are updated with new information.

Mr. Carlson says Twitter has the potential to supersede other forms of communication such as list-servs, which

may be outmoded. "I envision Twitter as a tool of communication that can clearly and concisely aggregate useful information for those who want a 'digital snapshot' of what's happening in Emergency Preparedness on any given day," said Mr. Carlson. Under Mr. Carlson's vision, MRC units would have their own twitter accounts that follow the feeds of other MRC units, FEMA, MEMA, and other emergency management agencies. Users could bypass character limits by posting links to their regularly updated blogs and websites.

Officials will have to work through some challenges before incorporating these new technologies into their emergency preparedness communications. Because of the open nature of the website, anyone can become a user using any account name. Users must ensure that information is accurate and is coming from the proper sources.

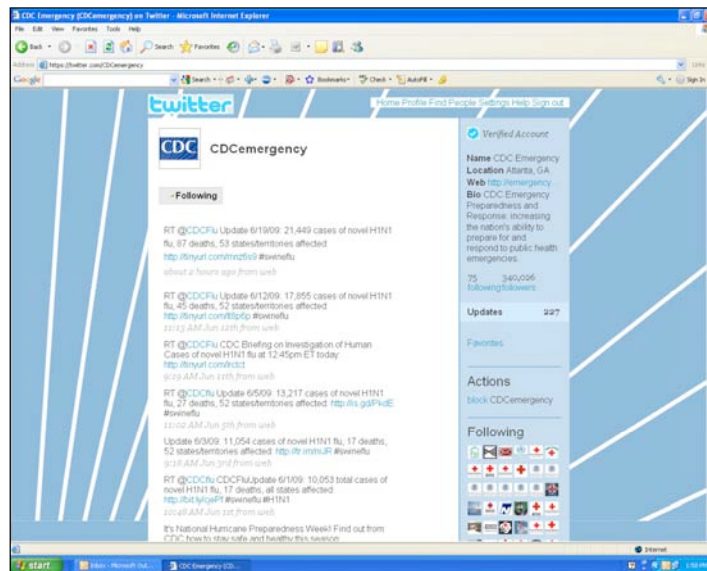
In addition to the challenges of fraud and misinformation, MRC unit leaders will need to think carefully about how Twitter is used. "These sorts of tools are only as useful as we make them," said Mr. Carlson. "Twitter can be overwhelming." If users aren't careful about who they follow, Twitter can quickly turn into a cacophony of voices sharing unhelpful

messages. Emergency preparedness personnel would have to find a balance between subscribing to too few and too many Twitter accounts to keep the flow of communications focused and manageable.

MRC coordinators are also investigating these internet functions as possible means of contacting their volunteers. In Boston, the Boston Public Health Commission is looking at asking volunteers to sign up for text messages about events and emergencies when they sign up for an event on their online calendar. Steph Sharp, Boston MRC coordinator, notes that volunteers must be comfortable with whatever new technology is used. "It's important that volunteers have access to these technologies," said Ms. Sharp. "We don't want to alienate volunteers who aren't comfortable using Twitter or text messages as a new means of communication."

Other websites, such as Facebook, could help MRC units find new ways of marketing themselves and reaching

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*The CDC used its Twitter account to provide up to date information on the H1N1 virus.*

## Volunteer Spotlight: Jaymi-Lynn Adams



Whether volunteering with the Medical Reserve Corps or the American Red Cross, Jaymi-Lynn Adams is an invaluable resource to her local emergency response teams. Ms. Adams, a volunteer for the Worcester Regional MRC, responded to a call for MRC volunteers from the ARC to help staff shelters in Texas as part of the emergency response to

Hurricane Ike. Her dedication and desire to help others are evident in her flexibility to work with both agencies and provide help wherever it is needed. “Jaymi is a wonderful team member who has gone above and beyond what is considered a great volunteer,” said Worcester Regional MRC coordinator, Shawn Winsor. “We are fortunate to have her as a part of our team.”

Ms. Adams, a dental hygienist born and raised in Worcester, first discovered the MRC program through a flyer she received in the mail. “The Medical Reserve Corps always looked like an interesting opportunity,” said Ms. Adams. “I like the idea of people from different backgrounds coming together to help in a response to a disaster.” Initially, she worried that her skill set wouldn’t fit in with the program. In her graduate studies at the Anna Maria College, she got a greater understanding of the program in an Incident Command System class and discovered that MRC units rely on volunteers from all kinds of professional backgrounds. With renewed interest, she joined her local MRC.

Last September, Ms. Adams got to apply her interest in emergency response in a deployment to Texas. Only days after attending a “fast track training” with the American

Red Cross, Ms. Adams was one of many MRC volunteers who agreed to volunteer for the Red Cross response to Hurricane Ike in Texas. She spent two weeks helping the Red Cross coordinate and staff its shelters all over Texas. She made shelter operations run smoothly in Anderson County and Aquilla by managing registrations and helping the pass the time with shelter residents waiting to return to their homes.

As the national offices for the American Red Cross and Medical Reserve Corps recently released a joint memo encouraging coordination between the two agencies, Ms. Adams shows the impact MRC volunteers can have working with the American Red Cross. “Knowing she is also part of the American Red Cross makes her a huge resource as we continue cross training with the ARC,” said Mr. Winsor. Ms. Adams describes both her work in Texas and her participation in the MRC program as a thoroughly rewarding experience. “I encourage anyone interested to join their local MRC unit,” said Ms. Adams. “You will see things you’ve never seen and learn things you never knew about yourself.”

In her spare time, Ms. Adams enjoys kayaking and reading.



*Ms. Adams, pictured above performing dental work in the Honduras, enjoys volunteering for multiple organizations and traveling.*

## MRC Unit Leaders Attend National Conference in Dallas

In early April, MRC unit leaders from around Massachusetts attended the 2009 Integrated Medical, Public Health, Preparedness and Response Training Summit in Dallas, Texas. This summit brought together emergency preparedness agencies and programs including U.S. Public Health Service (PHS), National Disaster Medical System (NDMS), Emergency System for Advance Registration of Volunteer Health Professionals (ESAR-VHP) and the Medical Reserve Corps program. To foster improved coordination, these agencies merged their annual national conferences into one summit. “It was a great opportunity to get to know each other and the

roles people play in protecting our country,” said Jennifer Frenette, MRC Region 1 (New England) Coordinator.

With so many different agencies and emergency responders meeting in one location, the summit was an excellent opportunity for networking and cross-training. The summit focused on education and information sharing for the variety of services necessary during a public health emergency. Training across organizations better prepared summit attendees for emergency response, while familiarizing themselves with the roles of other affiliated organizations in a disaster.

Attendees participated in a combination of plenary and breakout sessions that covered a wide range of disaster preparedness topics. Expert faculty presented on key topics such as clinical care, leadership skills, volunteer

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management practices, and response team issues. Some breakout sessions featured topics not usually covered – including the role a chaplain can play in emergency response, and how emergency coordinators can use social networking sites as another approach to communication and marketing. “These presentations broadened our perspectives and furthered our understanding of other viewpoints,” said Nancy Burns, Upper Merrimack Valley MRC coordinator.

As part of the summit, Diana Walker-Moyer, a registered nurse-practitioner who volunteers through the Upper Merrimack Valley unit, was given the Outstanding MRC Responder award for her help in the December 2008 ice storm response. Ms. Walker-Moyer was critical to shelter operations as she provided medical and special needs services.

The training summit allowed the emergency responders to develop relationships that will yield a stronger emergency response in the future. “We benefited from the pure synergy of interactions with colleagues from other agencies,” said Ms. Burns. “Training together is a crucial



*MRC unit leaders from Region 1 attended the 2009 Integrated Medical, Public Health, Preparedness and Response Training Summit.*

element in providing an effective, unified response.” Participants gained a greater understanding of other public health and medical response organizations, as well as their contributions to the full spectrum of care available during an emergency.

PowerPoint presentations from the workshops are available for download at [www.hhstrainingsummit.org](http://www.hhstrainingsummit.org). Photos are also available from the national MRC web site, on [www.medicalreservecorps.gov/PhotoGallery](http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov/PhotoGallery). The next national summit will be held on May 13, 2010 in Nashville, Tennessee.

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new volunteers. Facebook, a social networking site, permits MRC units to maintain a web presence if they do not have the resources for their own website. “Facebook could be helpful for MRC coordinators to get their units noticed among volunteers’ friends,” said Ms. Sharp. “It allows MRC volunteers to communicate with one another and provide feedback to their unit coordinators.”

DPH encourages MRC units and local boards of health to actively seek out new ways of reaching their volunteers. “With the decline of traditional media, including newspapers and TV news, it is essential that the emergency responders be able to reach their constituents through every avenue available,” said state MRC coordinator, Michael Coughlin. Mr. Coughlin also cautions against relying strictly on these technologies at such an early stage to contact volunteers. In order to broaden and streamline communications, MRC units will have to strike a balance between adapting to new technologies and retaining the methods volunteers are most comfortable with.



### **For More Information**

or to view a video about Massachusetts MRC units, please visit the website at:  
[www.mamedicalreservecorps.org](http://www.mamedicalreservecorps.org)

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For more information about starting a MRC unit in your community, please contact the Region I (New England) USDHHS MRC Coordinator:  
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