

coordinators to use their local expertise in contacting and activating volunteers while giving the ESF-8 desk the ability to allocate volunteers effectively on a statewide level.

The December ice storms presented unusual challenges for central coordination. The loss of power around the state hampered the ESF-8 desk early on. "Without power or telephone service for large areas of the state, communication was difficult," said Mike Coughlin, DPH local public health manager. "We had to find ways to staff shelters where the community's own volunteers could not be contacted or mobilized." Communication between shelters and the State EOC was also an occasional challenge. Some local shelter managers were uncertain as to how to request additional assistance for shelters with medical needs.

Despite these challenges, the ESF-8 desk worked successfully with MRC units to provide medical support staff to multiple shelters, including one in Fitchburg that stayed open for eleven days.

EPB Director Mary E. Clark praised MRC volunteer responses, "MRC members from across the

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officials are troubleshooting problems in communication, volunteer oversight and general coordination through a number of debriefings. They are actively pursuing follow-up actions that should provide for even smoother disaster relief operations in the future. The Medical Reserve Corps is taking an active role in the aftermath of the ice storm response. MRC unit representatives will participate in a working group of officials from the American Red Cross, MEMA, and DPH focused on creating more effective protocols for emergency response. The work group will seek to streamline the allocation of resources and volunteers so that shelters will never find themselves understaffed or overwhelmed.

One issue that will be addressed in future meetings is how unit leaders activate their units during large scale power outages. Many units rely on mass emails and reverse 911 services provided by towns. These methods were ineffective for some units, however, when many volunteers themselves were without power. In the Franklin County MRC unit, Mr. Chin was forced to rely on volunteers from communities in the southern portion of the region who still had power. Fortunately, some activated volunteers were trained HAM/Amateur radio operators and communicated from shelters with their unit coordinators. For future activations, MRC units are planning to incorporate new activation methods, such as media messages and sign board communications.

Ultimately, the successful MRC response to the December ice storms was due to the hard work of unit coordinators and volunteers. With their concerted efforts,

Commonwealth responded in large numbers and with great enthusiasm to lend a hand in this crisis. All who pitched in deserve thanks and praise." Mr. Coughlin also thanked MRC Coordinators for their work in the response. "MRC Coordinators showed tremendous commitment and flexibility in providing support to affected communities," said Mr. Coughlin. "Without their efforts, we would not have been able to respond to the ice storms as effectively as we did."

Representatives from DPH, MEMA, ARC, MRC, and MSAR are now part of a Shelter Volunteer Working Group, which will develop draft protocols to streamline central coordination for future disaster relief efforts. The draft protocols will be aimed at improving coordination of shelter needs between local emergency managers and the SEOC, and will be disseminated to stakeholders for review and comment. The working group will develop an education campaign strategy once the protocols are finalized so that every community will know how to work with the State EOC to provide a faster and more effective emergency response.

residents were kept safe and comfortable despite the extensive damage dealt to their homes and towns. "It was such a pleasure to work with all the volunteers who gave their time freely and showed so much compassion for the people displaced from their homes," said Region 4A Coordinator, Liisa Jackson. Mr. Chin agreed: "Overall, I think that because we were there to help, fewer lives were lost, and those who responded should be proud of their service."

★ **For More Information**

or to view a video about Massachusetts MRC units, please visit the website at: www.mamedicalreservecorps.org

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Massachusetts Medical Reserve Corps



Winter 2009

MRC Units Respond to Ice Storm Emergency

In December, units of the Massachusetts Medical Reserve Corps from across the state were activated to provide volunteer support in response to devastating ice storms in Central and Western regions.

A rare combination of low pressure, moist air and cold winds created severe ice storms that lasted two days and covered large portions of the state in over an inch of ice. The unprecedented storm left town infrastructures in disrepair after fallen trees damaged homes, business, roads and railways. Fallen trees and power lines covered in a thick sheet of ice contributed to large-scale blackout that left thousands of residents without power for up to a week. Many businesses were closed for over a week and, in worst cases, fallen trees trapped residents in their homes without heat or power. On Friday, December 12, 2008, Governor Deval Patrick declared a state of emergency.

American Red Cross Heating Shelters

In the face of widespread crisis, local and state emergency response agencies undertook a coordinated large-scale effort to provide disaster relief for affected communities as the power company restored electricity and towns cleared roads. As part of this effort, the American Red Cross, various municipalities and faith based organizations opened shelters across the region. These shelters gave residents without power a place to heat up or to stay overnight and receive meals.

While heating shelters were a critical component of the emergency response, many of the shelters' host organizations did not have the resources to staff every location fully. Furthermore, many elderly, disabled or chronically ill residents required medical attention. In order to meet this demand, Medical Reserve Corps

volunteers were activated from most regions of the state. "The December ice storms required extended response and recovery efforts that were greatly enhanced by the many Medical Reserve Corps volunteers who staffed shelters and assisted their neighbors and community members throughout the storm and the aftermath in frigid conditions," said Kathleen Conley Norbut, Western County MRC Coordinator.

The MRC Response

The Medical Reserve Corps demonstrated the positive impact volunteers can have in emergency response.

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Crews worked to restore power for days after devastating ice storms damaged power lines.

★ **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

Volunteers from different professional backgrounds and multiple skill sets provided a desperately needed helping hand. Registered nurses gave medical attention to the sick and elderly, clinically trained volunteers provided behavioral health treatment to emotionally distressed residents and volunteers without any medical training were critical in organizing and carrying out the logistics of an operating shelter.

Northern Worcester County was hit particularly hard by the ice storm with many thousands of residents without power for an extended period of time or needing shelter. In the Worcester region, 4,800 residents from 74 towns were given shelter. Worcester Regional MRC coordinator Shawn Winsor described the tremendous effort put forth by MRC volunteers. "As a relatively new coordinator I was overwhelmed by the response from area MRC units in our time of need," said Mr. Winsor. "For many MRC volunteers, this was their first activation. I want to assure them that their hard work and dedication were appreciated and recognized by many local and state officials who were grateful for their organization and professionalism."

Effective coordination between the various emergency response agencies was a key element in providing disaster relief. Communications between agencies and MRC units were largely successful due in part to previously developed partnerships. "Partnerships during the event with MRC units, the Department of Public Health, American Red Cross, Community Emergency Response Teams and local

emergency managers showed everyone has a place in future plans and cross training," said Mr. Winsor. "Care, comfort, health, procedures, paperwork, notifications and scheduling were better products because each group brought specific tools to the table." For some, the December ice storms helped identify MRC units as a valuable resource. "It was gratifying to hear requests come in for MRC support and that our response partners and management acknowledged the importance and crucial role that the MRC provides in emergency operations," said Upper Merrimack Valley MRC coordinator, Sandy Collins.

The Medical Reserve Corps also benefited from the collaborative relationship between units. Counties hit hard by the storms received help from units as far as Boston and Southeastern Massachusetts. Even units in affected communities sent help elsewhere after closing their shelters. Franklin County MRC coordinator Chet Chin found Western Massachusetts units were particularly efficient in sharing resources. "I believe that there was much needed collaboration and resource sharing in Western Massachusetts and know that sharing resources can overcome some of the limitations of 'individual' units," said Mr. Chin.

The Ice Storm Aftermath: Improving Preparedness

The ice storm response allowed MRC coordinators and other emergency response agencies to test their general response procedures. Public health and public safety

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Fallen trees closed roads and businesses and damaged homes across the state.

MRC members and public safety officials came together to help staff heating shelters around the state.



MRC volunteers in a Blanchard shelter serve refreshments to local residents.

Volunteer Spotlight: Vincent Storie

Read how Vincent Storie put forth multiple days of work helping shelters during the December Ice Storm



Vincent Storie, a senior at Brandeis College, exemplified the unwavering support and flexibility of the many MRC volunteers who were activated to respond to the December ice storm. Working multiple shifts over the course of two days, Vincent was an invaluable resource for many central Massachusetts residents staying in heating shelters.

Vincent, an undergraduate at Brandeis University, has spent most of his academic career actively pursuing medicine and emergency response. Vincent is currently on track to graduate with a major in biology and neuroscience and plans to enter Medical school immediately after graduating. Alongside his passion for medicine, Vincent recently took an interest in emergency response. Last summer, he was introduced to emergency response with an accelerated Emergency Medical Technician course. "I found the course and the work associated with it to be something completely different from clinical practice. It's much more dynamic work. It really got in my blood and stuck." While carrying the burdens of a challenging course load at Brandeis, Vincent still finds time to work over 20 hours a week as a paramedic. On top of a busy student life and his part time work as a paramedic, Vincent searched for more volunteering opportunities. Earlier this fall, he discovered the Medical Reserve Corps. The program immediately appealed to him: "I found it both very interesting and a great idea. I really believe that effective emergency response must draw resources and volunteers from the medical and public health community."

On Tuesday, December 16, Vincent was activated for the first time as an MRC volunteer to help staff Red Cross heating shelters. Vincent drove for over an hour from his home in Arlington to a shelter at Anna Maria College in Paxton, MA. He worked there for 12 hours, from 7 AM to 7 PM. After making it back home for a short night's sleep, Vincent was back on the road to carry out an 8 hour shift at a shelter in Hinton, MA. For long stretches of his shifts at both shelters, Vincent was the lone medical staff member on hand. His main duties consisted of caring for shelter residents with chronic conditions and determining which residents needed further medical attention or an ambulance.

Despite the hectic schedule and hard work, Vincent found the experience to be thoroughly rewarding. "When the Red Cross shelter coordinators told me how grateful they were to have medical support, it really made me appreciate the experience," said Vincent. "The whole time, I felt that I was needed and making a real contribution."

Vincent's tremendous efforts were also well appreciated by his Boston MRC unit coordinator, Stephanie Sharp. "Vincent's flexibility, willingness to travel, and cooperation with shelter management really made him an extraordinary volunteer during this event," said Ms. Sharp. "Had Vincent not been available, these shelters may not have had medical coverage. In every aspect of this incident Vincent exceeded even unreasonable expectations, for which he deserves recognition."

Vincent's tireless work ethic and compassion for others exemplify what so many MRC volunteers brought to the December ice storm response. Their efforts are the driving force behind the Medical Reserve Corps' integral role in emergency response.

With the little spare time that he has, Vincent enjoys entertaining his friends and cooking.

The State Emergency Operations Center in Framingham

The December ice storms required an emergency response effort that called on resources from across the state. An emergency response of this size requires strong central coordination. When an emergency requires state assistance, the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) activates the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) in Framingham. During the December storms, staff from MEMA and representatives from state agencies and others staffed the Emergency Support Function (ESF) desks at the SEOC to manage the emergency response and coordinate the allocation of resources. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) is the lead agency for the Health and

Medical component, known as ESF-8. While the SEOC was activated for the storms, staff from the Emergency Preparedness Bureau (EPB) covered the ESF-8 desk around the clock to monitor hospital and healthcare facility concerns and to help coordinate MRC volunteers to assist with medical needs at shelters.

At the ESF-8 desk, DPH staff worked closely with the American Red Cross (ARC) to respond to requests from shelters in need of resources and volunteers. Soon after the SEOC was activated, DPH requested that MRC units activate their volunteers. Some MRC coordinators worked directly with local communities and shelters to provide volunteers. Others, after contacting their volunteers, provided the list of available volunteers to the ESF-8 desk, which coordinated the assignment of those volunteers. This central coordination of volunteers allowed MRC unit

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