



Southwest Health District

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Volunteers from all disciplines – not just health care – welcome to join newly created Southwest Georgia Regional Medical Reserve Corps

A Southwest Georgia volunteer group focusing on community preparedness, health and safety has become the state's 14th Medical Reserve Corps and the first of its kind in the region.

"We're very pleased and excited to announce the formation of Southwest Georgia Regional Medical Reserve Corps," said Dr. Jacqueline Grant, health director for the 14-county Southwest Health District. "Its members will act as a vital resource in support of Public Health and other community partners in both emergencies and ongoing activities related to health and wellness."

The MRC is a unit of the Citizens Corps of Dougherty and Lee counties, said emergency preparedness specialist Travis Donnelly, one of the organizers of the new corps. It partners with two Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) in Lee and Dougherty counties and a Lee County Fire Corps, he said.

"You don't have to have a medical degree or healthcare experience to belong," said Donnelly. "The Southwest Georgia Regional MRC is actively seeking members regardless of whether they have medical experience. We have volunteer opportunities for people in all disciplines."

Donnelly added, "The main criteria for participating is that you are interested in volunteering in support of your country and that you want to assist friends and neighbors through community service."

Medical Reserve Corps' grew out of President George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address, said Donnelly. "President Bush asked all Americans to volunteer in support of their country, and MRCs were launched as a partner program with Citizen Corps. The Citizen Corps is a national network of volunteers dedicated to ensuring hometown security."

Citizen Corps, along with AmeriCorps, Senior Corps and the Peace Corps, fall within the USA Freedom Corps, which promotes volunteerism and service throughout the world, he said.

The establishment of an MRC in Southwest Georgia offers many benefits to residents, Grant noted. "It bolsters public health and emergency response infrastructures by providing supplemental personnel. As tightening budgets and limited resources are affecting healthcare and emergency response

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providers here and across the state and nation, volunteers like those with MRCs are increasingly important,” she said.

The corps also enables communities within the Southwest Health District meet specific health needs, allows communities to develop strategies to become healthier and safer and provides for more local autonomy. “With expertise available through an organization like the Southwest Georgia Medical Reserve Corps, local communities are not as reliant on state and federal resources,” said Donnelly.

Volunteers may be involved in a variety of health and preparedness activities, such as assisting local health departments with surge personnel needs, training with emergency responders and coordinating with or sharing information with partner organizations, he said.

“One vital task would be the receipt, repackaging, transportation and dispensing of pharmaceutical and medical supplies and equipment from the Strategic National Stockpile in the event of an influenza pandemic or other public health emergency,” said Donnelly. “Another is helping in shelters during times of disaster.”

MRC volunteers are also likely to be called upon to serve at disaster recovery centers, health fairs, health promotion events, school presentations, immunization programs and disease surveillance and data collection, he said. “They could also be instrumental in supporting neighbors and friends during a pandemic flu outbreak.”

Further, MRC volunteers can choose to support communities in need nationwide. “When the southeastern U.S. was battered by hurricanes in 2004, MRC volunteers in the affected areas and beyond helped communities by filling in at local hospitals, assisting at shelters and providing first aid to those injured by the storm,” said Donnelly. “During a two-month period, more than 30 MRC units worked as part of the relief efforts, including those whose volunteers were called in from across the country to assist the American Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.”

During the 2005 Hurricane Season, MRCs again stepped forward to support Red Cross health services, mental health and shelter operations, he said. “MRC members also supported the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services response and recovery efforts by staffing special needs shelters, community health centers and health clinics and assisting health assessment teams in the Gulf Coast region.”

More than 1,500 MRC members deployed outside their jurisdictions or on optional missions to the disaster-affected areas, said Donnelly. Around 123,500 volunteers belong to 653 MRC units nationwide.

“We welcome interested parties and potential volunteers,” Donnelly said. “To sign up, go the Southwest District Public Health Web site at www.southwestgeorgiapublichealth.org and complete the volunteer registration form. Our MRC is looking for both medical volunteers and volunteers who do not have medical backgrounds. If you want to help, we have important work for you, work that will make a difference to the health and wellbeing of everyone in Southwest Georgia.”

For more information about the Southwest Georgia Regional Medical Reserve Corps, contact Donnelly at 229-430-1978.

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