

Training Guide #1: Strategic Planning



Where are we going? How will we get there?



What is Strategic Planning?

Strategic planning is the process of determining your program's long-term goals and identifying the best approach for achieving those goals. It guides decisions and actions that shape what an MRC unit is, what it does, and why it does it. It is the foundation for program planning, tracking progress, and evaluation.

Strategic planning is a disciplined process of gathering information, exploring future scenarios, and thinking about how decisions will affect the future. It is also a creative process. It does not necessarily flow in one direction. Insight arrived at today might alter a decision made yesterday. The process moves forward and back before arriving at the final set of decisions. Your MRC unit should stay aware of changes over time and adapt its plan as necessary.

Get Ready ...

... Get Set ... Go!

The basic steps in the strategic planning process:

1. Get ready
2. State your mission and vision
3. Assess the situation
4. Develop goals, objectives, and strategies
5. Complete a written plan

Benefits of Strategic Planning

- Provide a roadmap for your MRC unit
- Identify and analyze your program's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
- Set realistic goals that are challenging and attainable
- Enhance decision-making and improve resource allocation
- Improve communications with external partners
- Develop a frame of reference for budgets and short-range operating plans
- Provide the framework for program evaluation and performance improvement.

Step I: Get Ready

First you must assess whether your MRC unit is ready for strategic planning. Are you committed to the effort and able to give attention to the “big picture?” Once your MRC unit determines it is ready to begin, you must perform the following tasks to pave the way for an organized process:

1. Identify specific issues that the planning process should address. Some examples:
 - General administration of the MRC unit
 - Role of MRC unit in everyday public health
 - Role of MRC unit in preparedness initiatives
2. Clarify roles in the planning process
 - Typically, the MRC unit will want to establish a planning team.
 - Consider how other local partners will have input into the planning process.
 - Identify stakeholders and partners. (Many MRC units set up partnerships when they were first established. A unit should periodically review its partnership and update them if circumstances have changed.) Determine partners roles in the planning process. You may ask them to serve on the strategic planning committee or another committee. If they are not part of the formal process, you may still want to obtain their input. Some stakeholders to consider are:
 - Representatives of local government agencies (e.g., public health) and hospitals
 - Representatives of local non-profit organizations (e.g., the Red Cross)
 - Representatives of nearby MRC units
 - Emergency planning personnel, first responders, etc.
 - Local fire and police departments
 - Key MRC volunteers
 - State or regional MRC representatives
3. Develop or review your organizational chart. Update or revise the chart if necessary.
4. Identify the information that must be collected to help make sound decisions.

Product developed at end of Step I:

- Work plan

Step II: State Your MRC Unit's Mission and Vision

A **mission statement** describes the purpose of your MRC unit – why it exists, what it hopes to accomplish. Some statements include the business

of the organization. Others explain their products or services or customers. An effective mission statement describes an organization in terms of its:

Purpose: why the MRC unit exists and what it seeks to accomplish

Business: the main method or activity through which the MRC unit tries to fulfill its purpose

Values: principles or beliefs guiding MRC volunteers

Below is the mission statement of the national Medical Reserve Corps, as currently stated on its website. How does it address these elements?

The mission of the Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) is to improve the health and safety of communities across the country by organizing and utilizing public health, medical, and other volunteers.

- Purpose: to improve the health and safety of communities.
- Business: organizing and utilizing public health, medical, and other volunteers.
- Values: promote health and safety through volunteerism and service.

To be consistent with the National Program, your unit's mission statement should build on the National Program's statement and be tailored to your unit's specific circumstances and focus.

Example mission statement: *The mission of the XYZ County MRC is to improve the health and safety of people of XYZ County by organizing and training a volunteers to assist in a public health crisis and provide surge capacity to address public health challenges.*

A **vision statement** (different from a mission statement) describes what the unit's success will look like. It is a picture of the unit's future makeup and where it is headed. Typically, vision statements are a short phrase or sentence that captures the ideal situation and serves as a rally point for constituents.

Example vision #1: *To be ready when called*

Example vision #2: *To be a widely recognized and respected community resource*

Example vision #3: *To be public health “minute men” for the 21st century*

Products developed at end of Step II:

- Draft mission statement
- Draft vision statement

Step III: Assess the Situation

Take inventory of the following issues:

- The community and people your program serves
- The situations (needs) in your community
- The types of services your MRC unit offers
- Your program's operations
- The environment in which your program operates (how it connects to other programs and entities)
- Support requirements (e.g., funding)

Review the mission and vision statements developed in Step II. Carefully consider the preparedness and public health needs of your community. This will likely require some data and information gathering. Write down the situations (i.e., problems or issues) that your MRC is trying to address. The questions below may help guide you in articulating the situation:

- What is the general nature of the problem or issue that your MRC wants to address?
- What are the factors contributing to this problem?
- For whom does the problem exist?
- Who has a stake in the problem (i.e., who cares whether or not it is resolved)?
- What do we know about the problem, issue, or people that are involved?
- Is there agreement on what current outcomes are unacceptable or need to be modified?
- Is more information needed? How do we get it?

Example situation statements are:

Example situation statement #1: *A primary limitation of the community's medical surge plan is the lack of health professionals to staff alternative care facilities.*

Example situation statement #2: *The community has developed an educational campaign on the benefits of healthy eating and exercise but lacks personnel to conduct outreach activities.*

In parallel, diagram how your MRC will interface with other preparedness and public health programs and entities that have a role in these needs areas. This will help you clarify how your MRC fits within the broader set of capabilities in your community.

Next, examine the status of your MRC (i.e., what is happening internally and externally). A good way to do this is by conducting a SWOT analysis (see below).

SWOT – CRUCIAL ELEMENTS

- **Strengths** are positive assets **within** your MRC unit (e.g., committed volunteers or participation in training activities).
- **Weaknesses** are negative aspects **within** your MRC unit (e.g., shortage of volunteers or lack of equipment).
- **Opportunities** are positive elements **outside** your MRC unit (e.g., strong partnerships with other local agencies).
- **Threats** are negative elements **outside** your MRC unit (e.g., lack of community interest or loss of funding support).

The key to doing a SWOT analysis is to think about ways to maximize the positive and minimize the negative elements related to your MRC unit. You want to use your strengths, take advantage of opportunities, and overcome threats. Focus on minimizing your unit's weaknesses so it will be less vulnerable to threats.

SWOT components should be mutually exclusive—something can't be a strength (S) and a weakness (W).

The end product of a SWOT analysis is often a two-by-two table listing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and potential threats as shown below.

Example SWOT analysis:

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Commitment of volunteers Support of local public health Diverse volunteer skill sets	No formal training program Limited management support Lack of supplies, equipment
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Support of local government Establish local partnerships Demand for public health support	Limited financial support Other programs competing Inadequate integration in community plans

The SWOT analysis highlights critical issues your program faces which the strategic plan should address, such as funding, volunteer tracking, and workforce sustainability. Choose your unit's most important issues.

Products developed at end of Step III:



- **List of your unit's SWOT elements**
- **List of critical issues to address in your plan**
- **Statement of situation (needs) MRC unit is trying to address**
- **Organizational chart showing how the MRC unit connects and/or works with other public health and preparedness programs.**

Step IV: Develop Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

This step involves the development of **goals** for the MRC unit, supporting **objectives** and **strategies** to achieve the goals and objectives. It is important to understand the difference between goals and objectives.

Goals are broad statements describing the desired long-term impact of your MRC unit. An effective goal statement describes what the program ultimately wants to accomplish and serves as the basis for decision-making and priority setting. It provides the “big picture” perspective of what the MRC unit hopes to achieve.

Examples of possible goal statements are below.

Example goal #1: *The goal of the XYZ County MRC is to identify, organize, and train local health professionals and lay people to respond to local emergencies.*

The goal statement above provides a general description of what the MRC unit hopes to accomplish and states the unit’s emphasis is on local emergency response. In some cases, the unit may identify a specific role and include this in its goal statement, as in the next two examples.

Example goal #2: *The goal of the XYZ County MRC is to ensure adequate medical care to our citizens in the event of a situation that overwhelms the community’s normal ability to care for the sick and injured by providing first aid care to first responders and treating the “walking wounded.”*

Example goal #3: *The goal of the XYZ County MRC is to create a community public health and medical volunteer resource that will be pre-identified, pre-registered, and prepared to respond to an emergency primarily by staffing Points of Dispensing (PODs).*

In examples #2 and #3, the goal still focuses on local emergency response, but the scope of responsibility is narrowed to specific roles, such as caring for first responders, treating the walking wounded or staffing PODs. This is likely to be beneficial as the MRC unit moves forward with volunteer recruitment, training, and acquisition of supplies and equipment. For example, volunteer training would best focus on roles required during a public health emergency. Other possible roles include helping with triage during an evacuation, staffing flu clinics, public education, special needs shelters, assisting hospitals with surge, and alternate care locations. Remember, no specific MRC unit goal or set of goals is “correct.” One of the

strengths of MRC units is that they are local, and it is critical that each unit works closely with its community partners to identify specific needs or roles.

Due to the infrequency of large-scale public health emergencies in most communities, the MRC program increasingly focuses on everyday public health issues. Recall that the mission statement provided earlier in this guide (from the MRC National Program Office) does not specifically mention emergency preparedness or response. Your MRC unit may wish to develop a goal statement that is inclusive of both its emergency and everyday roles. An example:

Example goal #4: *The goal of XYZ County MRC is to provide local communities with health care professionals and other citizens, who are willing to volunteer their time and knowledge to address a community’s everyday public health needs, and to support emergency personnel in times of crisis.*

Your MRC unit may have multiple goals. One or two goals is manageable, but having more than four goals is probably a sign that you are mixing the desired long-term impact with the shorter-term outcomes (such as achieving a certain number of recruits or conducting a target number of trainings) associated with achieving those goals.

The next step is to define how the MRC unit will achieve the goal(s). This involves identifying shorter-term outcomes or “objectives” that will enable the MRC unit to accomplish its goal(s).

Objectives are specific, measurable statements of the desired immediate or direct outcomes of your MRC unit. Unlike goals, which capture the “big picture,” objectives provide the specificity needed to decide how best to dedicate time and resources.

Useful objectives typically have the following qualities (see box below):

Take the SMART approach

Specific

Measurable

Agreed upon

Realistic

Time framed

Example objective #1: *Recruit and train volunteers*

This example falls short of a good objective for the following reasons

- It lacks specificity. Two issues—recruitment and training—are included in a single objective.
- It is not measurable. There is no information about the numbers or types of volunteers that the MRC unit hopes to attract.
- There is no specified time frame for either activity.

How many volunteers? Do you want to accomplish this in one year's time or three years? It is important that the parameters are defined.

The same objective phrased slightly differently:

Example objective #2: *Recruit 400 active volunteer responders to assist in the management of a public health emergency.*

The objective is now specific to recruitment, including a target number (400) by which the unit can measure success. It still lacks a specified timeframe, however, for volunteer recruitment. It is also unclear whether the unit wants to attract an additional 400 volunteers or to have 400 total.

Example objective #3: *Increase the number of clinical volunteers by 20% over current levels within the next 12 months.*

This remains specific to recruitment and establishes desired outcome (20% increase). It also defines a time period, seeks recruits with clinical training, and states the intent to increase numbers over current levels. Provided this is realistic and agreed upon, it is a well written objective.

The next step is to figure out the path your MRC unit will take to achieve it's goals and objectives.

Strategies are practical ideas, describing where to commit time and resources. They provide structure for developing activities. Within the context of the SWOT analysis, strategies establish a way to match strengths with opportunities.

Objective	Strategies
Increase the number of clinical volunteers by 20% over current levels within the next 12 months.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamline the application process. • Identify new recruiting methods. • Enlist support of local partners to build community awareness. • Learn what attracted current volunteers.

New insights may emerge in the planning process that change the thrust of the mission statement. Be prepared to go back to earlier steps and make use of new information to create the best possible plan.

Products developed at end of Step IV:

- **Draft goal statement(s) for the MRC unit**
- **Draft objectives aligned with the goals including target completion dates**
- **Draft strategies laying the groundwork for specific activities required to achieve the goals and objectives.**

TIPS

- ✓ **Make the time.** This process requires time to think and strategize.
- ✓ **Know your destination.** Have a clear idea of where the MRC unit is headed.
- ✓ **Be specific.** With objectives and deadlines.
- ✓ **Go a step further.** Outline activities and programs separately from objectives.
- ✓ **Be consistent.** Strategies and activities should flow from objectives to advance your mission.
- ✓ **Don't over plan.** Be realistic and don't try to develop the perfect plan.
- ✓ **Review the plan.** Are the elements realistic, internally consistent, and mutually supportive?

Step V: Complete a Written Plan

Put it in writing. Draft a final document and submit it for review to key decision makers. Ask others in your unit if the document can be translated into operating plans (detailed action plans) and if it answers key questions about priorities and directions in sufficient detail to serve as a guide.

Keep in mind intended purpose(s) of this document. An internal working document can be much less formal than a package you send to potential donors or an oversight agency. The document is also useful for communicating and coordinating with other partners and stakeholders or for training and integrating new volunteers. It will also be the foundation for conducting a program evaluation.

Product developed at end of Step V:

- **A written strategic plan.**

What's Next?

This is the first in a series of training guides for MRC programs. To learn the next steps in conducting an evaluation of your MRC unit, see:

- **Training Guide #2: Logic Models**
- **Training Guide #3: Performance Measures**

These guides—along with additional strategic planning resources—are available at the National Medical Reserve Corps website at www.medicalreservecorps.gov.