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Media Relations: Getting the Word out About the Medical Reserve Corps

A Guide for Local MRC Leaders



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Media Relations 101

Getting media coverage—print, television, radio, or Internet—is a great way to gain public awareness and support for your MRC unit. You also can promote upcoming events or ask the press to cover an event, announce new MRC units, and share stories of successful events. There are many ways to communicate your message through the media, but to do so, it is crucial that you understand the media and their needs.

Know Your Audience

First, know your audience. It is important to think about the audience the publication or station reaches. You want to ensure you select the best media outlet(s) to reach your intended audience. You may ask yourself, “Who do I want to hear my message...potential volunteers? Policymakers? Partner organizations?” How does my audience get its news? Why would they want to know about this story? Is there something I want them to **do** when they hear my story? Is this item purely to raise awareness, or is there a call to action, such as inviting this audience to attend our event or work with us in the future?

Once you have identified the target audience, you will want to take some time to learn about which media outlets or reporters might cover your story. Identify who covers community events, health topics, or who has covered your MRC unit in the past. You can do this by familiarizing yourself with the local media: watch the news, read the daily and community newspapers in your area, and listen to your local radio stations. This will give you an idea of who will most likely cover your story.

List Media Contacts

Next, create a list of media contacts. This list will take some time and require routine updates, as reporters and your audience change frequently. Note the following information:

- Names of reporters and/or editors
- Address, telephone/fax number, and e-mail
- How the journalist prefers to receive information: by telephone, fax, mail, or e-mail

This information can be obtained by calling the media outlet’s news desk or searching the outlet’s Web site. Most media outlets will have a “contact us” link on their Web site. Follow the directions on submitting information electronically. You also can obtain this information from national media directories such as Bacon’s (<http://www.bacons.com>) or BurrellesLuce (<http://www.burrellesluce.com>), but these can be costly. You also could ask other organizations in your area that focus on similar issues if they have a media list and share information.

Once you have a media list, keep it updated because the topics a journalist covers can change frequently. Keep track of contacts you make with the media, and ensure to add any new contacts you make to your list.

Provide an Introduction to Your Unit

It can help to build relationships with media contacts in advance by providing them with a brief introduction to your unit. News editors and reporters are interested in having their list of contacts handy, because they are often working on tight deadlines and may need information from reliable sources on short notice. They also may be interested in stories that have visual appeal, such as photos from a disaster drill or other MRC events that may be of interest to their readers. Ensure to keep any introductory messages brief, encouraging your contacts to follow up at their convenience. If they invite you to meet with them for an overview of your program, refer to the tips in the “Handling Media Inquiries” section of this guide.

Address a Specific Person

When contacting a media outlet, whether by telephone or by sending a news release, it is extremely important to try and address a specific person. However, if you are in doubt about who to contact, address a news release to the Editor at a daily newspaper, News Editor or Publisher at a community newspaper, Assignment Editor for television news, and the News Director for radio outlets.

Know What is Considered Newsworthy

Before you contact a journalist, know what is newsworthy. Is the topic:

- Relevant, timely, or unique?
- Representative of a current trend, a controversial issue, a change in practice, or first-of-a-kind?
- One that has the potential to impact the entire community?

An event that is major for your unit may not seem newsworthy to an editor. Ask yourself why the audience would want to know this information, and consider how to highlight the potential appeal.

Online Media

It can be helpful to develop Internet-specific contacts as you plan for media coverage. Certain audiences, such as young adults, may receive most of their news online.

If the newspapers you contact offer an online version of their printed paper, this does not require any separate effort on your part; the resulting stories simply appear in both formats. This outcome greatly expands the reach of your coverage. Ensure to save the hard copy clipping of any newspaper stories that cover your unit and the “soft copy” (the online article’s URL) of the online article, for future reference. These items can be useful in your unit’s media kit and other promotions in the future.

Many television and radio stations also have an online counterpart in which they post items affiliated to their broadcasts. See these sites for their preferred methods of requesting postings.

As you identify your target audiences, you may want to identify any Web sites or online media outlets that your target audiences tend to visit. For example, municipal employees and community service groups might visit their town’s Web site or special interest sites regularly. To reach audiences of online news, ensure that your media plan includes the name and URL of the sites where you would like to post your story and the name and contact information of the Web developer who maintains that site. You may need to contact the Webmaster and ask for guidelines on how to submit news items.

Now that you are prepared to contact the media, what should you do?

News Release

A news release gives the reporter the who, what, when, where, and why of a story. Smaller publications may use a news release word-for-word; others may use it as background information for a story. News releases follow a standard format:

- 1) **Organization's name.** The name of your organization should run across the top of the release and should be on your organization's letterhead.
- 2) **Contact information.** The name, telephone/fax number, and e-mail address of the staff person who should be contacted for more information should appear below the name of the organization.
- 3) **Release date.** The release date tells the reporter when the information in the news release can be publicized. If it can be reported right away, you can write "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE." If the information should be held until a specific date, you can write "EMBARGOED UNTIL XXX."
- 4) **Headline.** The headline is a short phrase that appears under the contact information. The headline should summarize the release and grab the reader's attention.
- 5) **Body.** The body of the press release contains information on the who, when, where, and why. It is important to give the most important information first. Less important information can follow. This style is called the inverted pyramid: the conclusion, or most important information, appears first and is followed by supporting information. The first paragraph, or lead, should be written to grab the reader's attention.
 - Try to use quotes, as this gives the story a human face. A quote should be included in the second paragraph.
 - Keep your message short and concise. Avoid jargon and technical terms. Write in the third person in the same style as a newspaper article.
- 6) **Boilerplate.** Often a short paragraph, boilerplate text appears at the end of a news release and is a brief description of your organization and its mission.
- 7) **End.** The symbol "###" centered at the bottom of the news release signals to a reporter that this is the end of the release. If the news release is more than one page, "—More—" should be typed in the center at the bottom of the page.

News Release Template

[Place on your letterhead with your MRC logo and/or the national MRC logo]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
[Insert date]

Contact: *[Insert name]*
Telephone: *[Insert number]*
E-mail: *[Insert e-mail address]*

Attention-Grabbing Headline

Sub-Headline Providing Additional Information (optional)

Who, What, Where, and When. *[Insert City, State]* Begin the news release with an interesting news hook that provides the media a reason to cover your story. The first paragraph also contains a summary of the main news. This paragraph should set the tone for the rest of the news release and should not exceed three sentences.

Why or How. Describe your MRC or event and explain why this news is important to the local area. This paragraph could include statistics on the subject, and you may want to elaborate on how this news will impact the region or state.

Quotes. Include quotes from your MRC administrators, health department representatives, or a supporter who is well-known to the community. Quotes should advance the story, provide a call to action, or spotlight successful activities.

Additional Why or How. This part of the news release (the body) should emphasize why local residents need to hear about this news.

Contact and Logistical Information. Include your contact information and any additional Web sites that could provide further background information. If you are able to arrange for an interview, or if sending the news release to a television station, suggest visuals you can provide that can accompany the story.

MRC Community Boilerplate. The Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) is a community-based civilian volunteer program that helps build the public health infrastructure of communities nationwide. Each MRC unit is organized and trained to address a wide range of challenges, from public health education to disaster response. For more information about the MRC of *[insert community name here]*, please visit *[insert community MRC Web address if applicable]* or call *[insert telephone number]*.

Sample News Release

[Faxed on MRC letterhead with the national MRC logo]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
[Month/Day/Year]

Contact: Chris Jones, Coordinator
Mystic River Medical Reserve Corps
Telephone: (000) 111-2222
E-mail: cjones@mystic.net

Regional MRC Responds to Flood Disaster Unit's First Deployment Cares for 100 Displaced Residents

Anytown, MA – Mrs. Madison was already concerned when last week's heavy rains pummeled her windows and howling winds bent the nearby bushes sideways. But the 80-year-old knew there was a crisis when she watched fellow residents being evacuated by the fire department's rescue boats. More than 100 elders living in the ABC complex and entire families from neighborhoods in South Anytown were taken to emergency shelters as flood waters lapped at their homes. The majority of shelter staffing at the high school and the Council on Aging was provided by volunteers from the Mystic River Medical Reserve Corps.

Eighty MRC members—both medical and non-medical—served overlapping shifts at both shelters across 4 days, until the flooding subsided and residents were allowed to return to their homes. This was the unit's first deployment during a disaster. The Mystic River MRC was formed in 2006 and has recruited and trained 300 members to date. Although the unit has participated in community service events and drills over the past year, volunteers received their first emergency call-out on Thursday. Statistically, only 1 in 4 volunteers would be available to respond to any given event. However, members were asked to remain "on standby" when they learned of a potential threat to their community, boosting their ability to assist in large numbers.

"Anytown is much safer because of the surge capacity offered by the local MRC," said Frank Single, regional health director. "It would have been nearly impossible for us to assemble enough trained personnel on short notice to manage the additional needs of these frail elders. In addition to all the hands-on patient care, we needed large numbers of people around the clock to make phone calls and other arrangements, handle the paperwork, and deal with the many unexpected demands that come with a disaster."

The mayor of Anytown added, "We didn't know until disaster hit just how much we needed our MRC. They did everything from changing bandages, to playing guitar and keeping these people's minds off their problems." According to Mrs. Madison, "I felt so much safer when those very capable volunteers from the MRC made sure I was ok."

--- More ---

The Mystic River MRC was formed for three purposes. 1) Its top priority is to be ready in case of a public health emergency, such as setting up clinics to administer medication during a disease outbreak. The last time Anytown needed an emergency clinic was in May of 2005 to combat exposure to Hepatitis A from a restaurant worker. Four hundred local residents were inoculated and introduced to a public information campaign explaining the risks and ways to avoid contracting the disease. 2) The MRC also is training for “mass-casualty” incidents—such as last week’s flooding disaster or any event in which large numbers of people are injured or threatened. 3) Finally, the MRC exists to support public health initiatives throughout the year, as needed. Reporting to the Office of the Surgeon General, nearly 700 MRC units have been established throughout the United States.

For more information about the local unit or the MRC program, contact Chris Jones, coordinator of the Mystic River MRC, at (000) 111-2222 or cjones@mystic.net. Event photos and additional background information are available upon request. Visit the Office of the Civilian Volunteer Medical Reserve Corps Web site at <http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov>.

The Mystic River Medical Reserve Corps (MRMRC) is a community-based civilian volunteer program that helps build the public health infrastructure of communities nationwide. Each MRC unit is organized and trained to address a wide range of challenges, from public health education to disaster response. For more information about the MRC in the Anytown region, please call (000) 111-2222.

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Media Advisory

A media advisory, also known as a media alert, announces an upcoming event on which you would like press coverage. It answers the same “who, what, when, where, and why” questions as the news release; however, it is shorter and written to entice the media to attend your event. You should send this out no later than 48 hours before your event. The media alert format is as follows:

- 1) Media Advisory (title)
- 2) FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE or EMBARGOED UNTIL...
- 3) Attention-grabbing headline
 - Who
 - What
 - Where
 - When
- 4) Detailed information about the event such as why it is being held, why it is important, and who will be there.
- 5) Contact information

Sample Media Advisory

[Place on your letterhead with your MRC logo and/or the national MRC logo]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 26, 2007

Contact: Mary Johnson
Telephone: (000) 123-4567
E-mail: mj@anytown.us.gov

County to Test Mass Vaccination Plan

Thousands of community members including 200 Medical Reserve Corps volunteers expected to turn out for exercise

Who: The Anytown Medical Reserve Corps and Anytown County Health Department
What: Mass vaccination exercise
Where: Anytown Junior High School
1234 West Elm Street
Anytown, US 12345
When: June 30, 2007

The Anytown Medical Reserve Corps, with the Anytown County Health Department, will be conducting a mass vaccination exercise. More than 3,000 community members and 200 volunteers are expected to turn out to help test the county's mass vaccination plan. This exercise will test the Health Department's ability to vaccinate a large number of people quickly in the event of a flu epidemic. John Smith, Anytown's Mayor, and Joe Johnson, Health Commissioner, will be on hand to answer questions.

To learn more about the Anytown County Health Department's Medical Reserve Corps program, contact:

Mary Johnson
Telephone: (000) 123-4567
E-mail: mj@anytown.us.gov

The Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) is a community-based civilian volunteer program that helps build the public health infrastructure of communities nationwide. Each MRC unit is organized and trained to address a wide range of challenges, from public health education to disaster response. For more information about the MRC of Anytown, USA, please visit <http://www.anytownmrc.us.gov> or call (000) 123-4567.

Fact Sheet

A fact sheet can be used to support and expand on a news release. It can be sent as an attachment with the news release. Reporters often use fact sheets for background information. Tips for writing a fact sheet include the following:

- Provide historical, anecdotal, and factual information that can be used in an in-depth article
- Use numbers if possible
- Think like a reporter—anticipate questions and provide answers
- Make it easy to read by using subheadings and bullets
- Keep it between one and two pages in length
- Type “MORE” at the bottom if the fact sheet is more than one page, and type “###” at the end of the fact sheet
- Provide contact information including name, telephone number, e-mail address, and Web site if applicable
- Use letterhead or include the organization’s logo

Media Kit

A media kit, also known as a press kit, is a pre-packaged set of promotional materials of a person, company, or organization distributed to members of the media for promotional use. A media kit typically contains the following:

Background or program overview. Develop a one-page document that describes the organization's mission and activities. Include a brief history, accomplishments, and the organization's key personnel.

Basic fact sheet. Answer concisely who, what, where, when, why, and how.

Supplemental fact sheets. Include information that builds on the basic fact sheet. These can include one-pagers on the services MRC members can provide to the community or highlight specific topics the local MRC addresses in the community.

Media advisory or news release. Send the media advisory or news release to the media 3 weeks to 24 hours prior to a planned event to inform reporters of the event.

Feature story. Select a feature story, which often covers human interest topics or highlights a success story (it is not about an event or a time-sensitive subject).

Highlights of upcoming events. Maintain an up-to-date list of upcoming events relevant to your MRC and the topic being covered.

Brief biographies of spokespeople. Include a 3-4 paragraph biography on the person who serves as spokesperson for your MRC unit.

Photographs. Ask in advance if you can send the publication photos electronically. Also note on your media advisory if you will have photographs available. Large publications and daily newspapers will often send their own photographer when covering an event.

Quotes. Prepare a list of remarks that community leaders have made about the MRC. These quotes can be used in publications without calling for permission and serve as an endorsement.

Pitching Your Story to the Media

Pitching is an active approach to encourage media coverage and strengthen relationships with reporters. A pitch can be done by e-mail or telephone in addition to the news release. This approach can yield many benefits, including the following:

- An increase in the likelihood the media will cover your story
- The addition of a human face and voice to a story
- Capability of bringing the story to life
- Capturing a detailed story in a catchy, short-story concept

It is helpful to determine in advance when various papers go to press and when other outlets are about to broadcast so you can time your pitch accordingly. Learning their deadlines allows you to submit any materials (such as photos and fact sheets) far enough in advance to give the reporter some comfortable lead time in which to work. For example, if you know that the news deadline for your town's weekly paper is noon Monday for publication on Thursday, you may want to deliver your media kit to the reporter by Friday. If you build your reputation with media contacts as a reliable source, they are likely to pay closer attention to your pitches in the future.

As with the news release, it is important to know the reporter you are going to contact. You should know:

- How to pronounce and spell his or her name
- The reporter's pitch preference (e-mail or telephone)
- What he or she typically covers or has recently written
- Know how the reporter covers a story, or their "voice"

If sending an e-mail pitch:

- Do not just send a copy of the press release
- Attach the press release as a reference
- Get to the heart of the story in a couple of lines
- State your main message and what you hope he or she might write about
- Carefully construct the subject line—avoid being vague, yet capture the reader's attention

If calling a reporter:

- Prepare talking points and use them as a guide, not as a script
- Introduce yourself and reference previous conversations if possible (or admit you haven't spoken before)

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- Ask if the reporter is on deadline, and if so, offer to call back
 - Call until you reach the reporter, yet leave only one voicemail
 - Keep the pitch to 30 seconds

The best times to call a media outlet vary, depending on the type of media you wish to call.

- Call **newspapers** between 10:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m.
- Call **television stations** between 9:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.
- Call **radio stations** early, around 7:00 or 8:00 a.m.

You will have constructed a good pitch if you:

- Include a reason or “hook” for the reporter to cover your story
- Provide the most important news in the first paragraph
- Include a human interest element: a “face of the issue”
- Provide background information or numbers if possible
- Provide additional resources such as a Web site
- Be concise
- Avoid jargon and technical terms
- Be prepared to follow up

Sample Pitch (Call to an Editor)

"May I please speak with Sue Smith, editor of the Medical News Section of the Daily Times?"

[The call is routed to Sue Smith.]

"Hi, Sue. This is Chris Jones of the Mystic River MRC. You may remember that we spoke briefly this spring, when you assigned reporter Dave Davis to cover our story on the flood evacuations? I wonder if you'd be interested in another story idea."

[Yes, but I'm on deadline; would you please call back after 4?]

"Hi, it's Chris again—calling after 4 as you requested. Is this a better time to discuss a possible news item?"

[Fine, and thanks for calling back. Go ahead.]

"Our MRC unit (you remember, that's the Mystic River Medical Reserve Corps) is participating in an EDS drill next month. That stands for an Emergency Dispensing Site—when we'd give medications to stop the spread of a disease. Are you with me so far?"

[Just a minute...that's MRC, and EDS; thanks for slowing down with the acronyms. Setting up a clinic to stop disease. OK, continue. You'll be sending me the all details in an e-mail, right?]

"Yes, and we'll include background about our unit and what we're trying to test in our drill. Your e-mail is smith@dailynews.com, correct? Good; now here's an overview of the story."

"We'd like as many local residents as possible to join us at the Center School in Anytown, between 5 and 8 p.m. on the 20th, for free inoculations. Mayor Jones has a special interest in emergency response, so he's agreed to be one of our victims."

"The school is at 3 Main Street, and there's plenty of parking. We're expecting a big crowd, so we'll have lots of signs and several of our MRC members directing traffic. A similar drill across the state drew 500 people, so it's a major event to test how well our public health volunteers and first responders work together under pressure."

[I see; tell me how this is going to work.]

"Both area residents and our unit would benefit. The public would receive free influenza, pneumonia, and tetanus shots, so they'd be inoculated against actual diseases. We'd also have some posters and handouts, so they'd learn about health issues in the process, like cough etiquette and the value of hand-washing."

"Meanwhile, we'd be able to see how well we could set up and run the clinic, simulating disaster conditions: How quickly can our members assemble, can we communicate effectively

with our new radios, will we interact well with our response partners, and so forth. The point is, what can we learn from this exercise, so we'll be prepared to respond in an actual emergency, such as an anthrax exposure or an outbreak of the flu?"

"Hundreds of people would be involved, because we're working with our local police, fire, Red Cross, Salvation Army, emergency services, and other responders. We're also warned that there will be a couple of mock incidents—somebody is going to faint or trip, and we'll have to see how quickly we can get them treated and onto an ambulance.

"Do you think we could get a brief notice into the paper ahead of time, inviting the public to join us on the 20th, and then have coverage of the event itself?"

Notes:

- Because this is not the first call to the editor, the MRC coordinator knew how this person prefers to be contacted—by telephone, using her first name, with a fact sheet and other details submitted by e-mail. If instead this is the *first* contact, always address the editor or reporter using the more formal "Ms. Smith," until she invites you to use her first name.
- It helps to mention a previous connection, such as a favorable news story that went well for the paper and reflected positively on your unit.
- Verify the preferred e-mail address, especially because the editor may ask you to include the reporter or another editor for details about this story.
- Recognize that others may need you to define acronyms and technical concepts. These terms may be unfamiliar to new reporters, and they would be taking notes, so remember to speak slowly and clearly as appropriate. Invite their questions.
- Offer hooks early that would catch attention; such as the mayor's interest and involvement and the vast numbers of people and agencies that have participated in similar events. Note the benefit to the public and the unit, and possibly suggest photos—such as the evacuation onto an ambulance.
- Close with a call-to-action: a brief notice of the event, plus coverage that day.

A *written* pitch (by fax, e-mail, or printed letter) should contain similar information. Be brief and to the point, ensuring that the recipient's name and title are correct and that there are no typos or spelling errors. Always use your Marc's letterhead in a written pitch letter. Good luck!

Handling Media Inquiries

Responding to Media Inquiries

- Be Prepared. Designate a staff member to serve as the spokesperson for your MRC unit. Maintain a media log to track media inquiries and their handling.
- Be Responsive. Respond to all media inquiries in a timely manner, as journalists are usually on deadline. A slow response could damage your future credibility as a spokesperson. Track inquiries and responses in your media log.
- Follow up. Follow up with journalists in a timely manner. Evaluate your handling of the inquiry by reviewing media logs, coverage of the issue, and any feedback received from the public or fellow staff.

Tips for a Successful Interview

Before the interview, know the following:

- Reporter's name with correct spelling and direct telephone number
- Name of the publication or station
- Subject of the interview and the story the reporter is generating
- Your role in the story (why are you being interviewed?)
- Is it a telephone interview, and is it being tape recorded? Or, is it an in-person interview?
 - For telephone interviews, clarify whether they will be calling you and when, or whether they are awaiting your call.
- When the story will run and in which section of the newspaper it will appear (or, in which news segment or what time it will appear)
- The reporter's deadline

During the interview:

- Concentrate on two to four key points you want to convey.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, tell the reporter you do not have the information, but that you will get back to him or her with the answer. Do this as soon as possible.
- Be succinct. Answer questions directly and completely. Provide the interviewer with your key points, but do not ramble. Stay with the subject of the interview, and return to it as quickly as you can if you stray or are led away from the key message.
- Remember: nothing is ever "off the record."

Taking Photographs

The following hints have been adapted from Kodak's "Top 10 Tips for Great Pictures." This information also can be found at <http://www.kodak.com>.

Take pictures at eye-level. An eye-level angle will create a personal and inviting feeling that pulls you into the picture.

Use a plain background. A plain background shows off the subject you are photographing. When you look through the camera viewfinder, study the background, and make sure it is not busy or distracting.

Use flash outdoors. Bright sun can create shadows. Use your camera's flash to eliminate these shadows and lighten the face. If the person is within 5 feet, use the fill-flash mode. Beyond 5 feet may require the full flash mode. On cloudy days, use the fill-flash mode or do not use flash at all. Use a flash if the subject is indoors and standing in front of a window on a sunny day or if the background is lighter than the foreground.

Move in close. If your subject is smaller than a car, take a step or two closer or zoom in before taking the picture. Your goal is to fill the picture area with your subject.

Move the subject from the middle. To add variation to your pictures, move the subject away from the center of the picture. If you have an auto-focus camera, you may need to lock the focus when doing this.

Lock the focus. If your subject is not in the middle of the picture, it may be necessary to lock the camera's focus. To do this, first center the subject and press and hold the shutter halfway down. Second, reposition your camera while still holding the shutter button. Finish by pressing the shutter button all the way down to take the picture.

Know your flash's range. Pictures taken beyond the flash's range will be too dark. For most cameras, the flash range is about five steps away. To be safe, position yourself no farther than 10 feet away from your subject.

Do not be afraid to direct. Take control of your picture by moving subjects where you think would make the best shot: away from bright sunlight, towards a less distracting background, or add props, such as MRC-branded items such as signs or clothing, to enhance the picture.

Use the highest resolution possible. Most digital cameras offer several resolution settings. For the highest quality photos that are crystal clear and ideal for printing and publishing, choose the highest resolution setting on your camera.

Other helpful hints for MRC-related photos might include:

- Photograph people from the front to show their faces
- Do not include more than four people in a group picture
- Show MRC volunteers working instead of posing
- Save photos as JPEG, TIF, or EPS files

If children are involved, be particularly careful to obtain permission from their parents to use the picture. Think carefully whether it is best to use the child's name in a proposed caption, especially if the photo might be used on the Internet. It can be less problematic to take event photos that capture the child in action (such as playing a game at a health fair or undergoing a screening) without showing their face in the picture.