



medical
reserve
corps

Guide to Developing MRC Purpose (Risk/Needs Assessment)

A Guide for Local MRC Units



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Introduction

You've formed a Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) unit. Now what?

The obvious question is: What are you going to do? To answer this question, you may first want to know what's going on in your community. Intuitively, your programming should help address some key preparedness and public health issues in your area. This is often what we mean when we talk about *targeting* programs. Your MRC will never be able to meet every possible need in your area—it only must help local volunteers begin to make an impact.

We know that all localities are different. It is natural to assume that your focus and programming will be different too. To sort out these differences and gain a greater understanding of the context and environment in which you plan to work, it is critical to conduct a risk and/or needs assessment. Generally, assessments are used to study a particular situation to determine which risks or problems are likely to occur. They are also helpful in identifying *gaps* in current aligned programs.

We all conduct assessments in our work and daily life. Yet, when we refer to assessments in the context of the MRC program, we are really talking about two types of assessments: (1) needs assessments and, more specifically, (2) risk assessments. Needs assessments are used to gain a greater understanding of the public health and emergency preparedness needs in your community. Simply put, they seek to account for the difference between *what is* and *what should be*. This may mean considering the needs of a number of local actors: your local population, specific demographic groups, or even your housing agency. Risk assessments tend to be more focused. They are often used to identify specific hazards in your area. These hazards will create specific needs that may or may not be well known or recognized in your community. That said, any assessment you undertake should take into account both needs and risks. There is no need for two parallel processes.

Getting Started

Before proceeding, determine whether a community agency has already conducted a risk and/or needs assessment in your area. Many community agencies, such as an emergency management agency, may have already conducted these assessments, and this information may be readily available to you.

Your assessment should include enough information so that you can imagine possible solutions. For those designing a risk/needs assessment, it is helpful to think about the following questions:

1. What does the assessment intend to accomplish?
2. Whose needs will be assessed?
3. How will the assessment be conducted?
4. How will the information be used?

Planning for Risk/Needs Assessments

Assessments come in all shapes and sizes. Some MRC units may have the capacity to conduct very comprehensive and resource-intensive assessments; others may be limited to conducting a more informal assessment. There is no best approach, only a *best fit* approach. Do what makes the most sense for your MRC, and remember that assessments are often only the first step in the planning process.

Begin with what you know about your community. Chances are you know a lot.

Think about how you plan to gather information. What data do you need? Assessments may draw on existing data, e.g., census information, emergency operations plans, or hazard mitigation plans. They may also depend on soliciting new data via surveys, interviews with key leaders, or community forums. Again, you will need to find what works best for your program and your community.

Conducting Assessments

In the past, some community and MRC leaders may have assessed the likelihood of disasters or other health-related emergencies in their area. Others leaders have broadly examined the ongoing public health needs of their area. Each community situation is different, and you will have a unique perspective on your community situation. No risk and needs assessment addresses all needs, and there will always be additional factors to consider. Assessment is a continuous, dynamic process. As such, it is more effective to conduct a limited risk and needs assessment and work with what you have, rather than wait until you have considered each possible risk or need.

The role of your MRC unit may change as new community needs are identified and as volunteers bring new skills to your unit. Think of your initial assessment as a starting point. It should be updated once your community's needs are reassessed.

Understanding the Role of the MRC in Community Planning and Response

As part of the assessment, it is important to research existing emergency operations plans in your jurisdiction to determine which response role might be appropriate for your MRC unit and where the MRC can help to fill gaps.

As a prospective unit, unit coordinator, or housing agency, identify the role that the MRC unit will play in the local community. Identify how the MRC fits in with the existing local public health, medical, and emergency services infrastructure to guarantee that there is a role for your MRC unit. In addition, to help avoid turf battles, knowing where your MRC fits will help with volunteer recruitment, retention, and training.

Taking Stock of Community Risk/Needs

After conducting an assessment, you will have likely identified a long list of needs and/or potential challenges. You may find that you have more problems than answers, but this is okay. One part of program planning is being informed. It is better to know more than less.

Your assessment process should provide greater context. You may be able to identify key themes or potential areas of focus, as well as areas that are not appropriate for the MRC. This information will help you develop a more appropriate mission and relevant goals and objectives.

In reality, unless you have an endless supply of resources, you will likely have to make hard choices about your focus (goals) and programming (objectives). The following MRC Guidance Series documents help outline a process for developing a mission, goals, and objectives, and implementing a strategic process for developing programming:

- Guide to Developing an MRC Unit Plan
- Guide to Strategic Planning for MRC Units

MRC Purpose Checklist

- Determine if a risk/needs assessment has already been conducted.
- Determine whose needs should be assessed.
- Determine how the assessment will be conducted.
- Determine how the information will be used.
- Research existing community operations plans.
- Review historical data for the community.
- Conduct assessment.
- Review results for key themes or potential areas of focus.
- Use results to develop mission and relevant goals and objectives.

Additional Resources

FEMA Independent Study Course, Anticipating Hazardous Weather and Community Risk:
<http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is271.asp>

Assessing Your Flood Risk:
<http://www.floodsafety.com/national/property/risk/index.htm>