



Guide to Risk Management for MRC Units

A Guide for Local MRC Units



Guide to Risk Management for MRC Units

As Medical Reserve Corps units work to build public health resilience in their communities, concerns sometimes arise about the safety of volunteers and those they serve. Often, unit leaders turn to liability protection as the solution to these issues. However, liability protection is only one small piece of managing the risks of incorporating volunteers into public health, preparedness, and response activities. Comprehensive risk management activities can help protect the MRC and its volunteers while providing a safe, supportive working environment for volunteers as they serve the program's mission. Consider the following points when thinking about risk management and liability issues:

1. Within certain limits, anyone can file suit against anyone at any time for anything. Laws can provide you with a defense, and insurance policies can help pay for legal defense and for loss or damages, but they do not take the place of a commonsense approach to protecting your volunteers and those they serve from harm.
2. Even if you feel that your organization and your volunteers are sufficiently protected from legal liability for unintended harm, many irreplaceable resources cannot be protected, such as your organization's reputation and partnerships. A comprehensive risk management program can help you protect these priceless assets.

Risk Management—What Is It?

Risk management is the process of identifying the potential risks faced by an organization and seeking ways to remove or mitigate those risks.

Why Is Risk Management Important?

Every activity involves risk. The activities undertaken by MRC volunteers involve risks such as unintended harm to an individual treated by an MRC volunteer. While an MRC unit cannot remove all of its risks and still accomplish its mission, it can take steps to reduce the risks involved while protecting the unit, its volunteers, and those they serve.

The basic purpose of any volunteer program's risk management plan is threefold:

- To reduce the risk of harm (intended or unintended) to the individuals who are served by the volunteers and to the volunteers themselves
- To reduce the risk of financial loss to the volunteers and the agency they volunteer for
- To reduce the potential for damage to the agency's intangible assets, such as its reputation, its partnerships, and its ability to recruit volunteers and raise funds

General Principles of Risk Management in Volunteer Programs

Many of the aspects of risk management in volunteer programs probably include actions that you are already taking, such as screening volunteers. The best way to incorporate good risk management practices into your MRC unit (without adding a great deal of additional work) is

to look at every interaction with a volunteer as a chance to manage risk. For example, risk management can be built into the following activities:

- **Selecting Volunteers**—This process involves recruiting and screening volunteers to ensure that they are a good fit for their roles within the MRC. Recruiting materials can help manage risk by helping potential volunteers determine whether serving in an MRC unit is right for them. Not every volunteer is a good fit for your organization.
- **Preparing Volunteers for Their Roles**—The better prepared a volunteer is to fill his or her role in the MRC, the smaller the chance of unintended harm. Volunteers need to know not only what they should do, but what they should not do. Your unit's volunteer position descriptions, code of conduct, training, and exercises are all a part of this strategy.
- **Proper Utilization of Volunteers**—A clear plan for activation of the volunteer unit can help ensure that the volunteers have a clear mission and that there are steps in place to provide for their physical and emotional well-being in addition to providing protection from legal liability, where applicable.
- **Protecting Safety and Well-Being**—Providing MRC volunteers with the protective equipment they need in order to safely fill their roles, making sure the areas they work in are safe, and working to protect the physical and emotional well-being of your volunteers are all ways of protecting your most important asset—volunteers.

Checklist: Policies for MRC Units to Include in a Comprehensive Risk Management Plan

From the recruiting plan to post-response activities, every interaction with a volunteer is an opportunity to optimize the volunteer's experience and manage the risks inherent in the MRC unit's mission. Examples of some of the policies and procedures outlined below are available on the MRC Web site as "Promising Practices." Others (such as confidentiality policies) may already be established through your unit's housing agency. The following list is a starting point from which your unit can develop a plan tailored to its needs.

- Position descriptions: Each position or volunteer role should have a written description with as much detail as possible:
 - Purpose of the position
 - Title
 - Location (if known)
 - Key responsibilities
 - Sample tasks/activities
 - Whom the volunteer reports to
 - Length of appointment/time commitment (if known/applicable)

-
- Qualifications (including training that will be required)
 - Support provided (What can the volunteer expect from the organization?)
- Volunteer application
 - Volunteer selection/screening
 - Make your volunteer placement decisions based on a written screening policy, using some combination of the following screening methods or any other methods that your unit finds appropriate:
 - Application review
 - Interviews (with standardized questions based on the position description)
 - Reference checks (with standard questions)
 - Verification of licensure and credentials
 - Criminal background checks
 - Always be consistent with your screening procedures!
 - Orientation
 - Spell out what is expected of your volunteers.
 - Spell out what is not allowed, even if it seems like common sense.
 - Provide handbooks with written policies to serve as a reference for volunteers.
 - Provide volunteers with an orientation to the mission and policies of the MRC unit that includes the following information:
 - What is expected of them
 - What they can expect
 - Provide volunteers with an orientation to the chain of command (e.g., Incident Command System, National Incident Management System) and explain how MRC operates within this.
 - Training: Volunteers should receive additional training appropriate to their roles, including training on safety measures and protective equipment, if necessary.
 - Additional policies regarding volunteer activities
 - Confidentiality of information (both personal information of volunteers and the health information of those they serve)
 - Representation of your MRC unit or its housing agency (e.g., media interviews)
 - Fundraising/handling funds
 - Alcohol and drug use
 - Safety guidelines

-
- Requirements regarding identification badges and other identification methods
 - Activation/deployment and deactivation procedures
 - Policy for termination of volunteers
 - Be clear from the start about what actions warrant dismissal.
 - Document decisions.
 - Do not fail to act.
 - Apply policies consistently.

Additional Resources

Risk Management Tutorial:

<http://www.nonprofitrisk.org/tools/volunteer/volunteer.shtml>

Public Entity Risk Institute:

<http://www.riskinstitute.org/>

How to Create Volunteer Position Descriptions:

http://nationalserviceresources.org/files/legacy/filemanager/download/HON/vol_position_wks.pdf

MRC-TRAIN and MRC Core Competencies:

<http://www.medicalreservouncils.gov/TRAINResources>

Energize Inc.—Risk and Liability Library:

<http://www.energizeinc.com/art/subj/risk.html>

Herman, Melanie and Peggy Jackson. *No Surprises: Harmonizing Risk and Reward in Volunteer Management*. Washington, DC: Nonprofit Risk Management Center, 2001.