



medical
reserve
corps

Guide to Developing MRC Advisory Boards

A Guide for Local MRC Units



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Background

Although a Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) unit's housing organization bears the responsibility for most of the day-to-day management of MRC volunteers, there are many broader activities that benefit from the involvement of individuals outside the housing agency. An MRC unit that fails to engage its community partners in the planning process will have a difficult time implementing its plans. By involving community partners in the development of your MRC unit, you can create awareness, identify new resources, and build sustainability. Involving community partners in MRC planning can take different forms, such as planning committees, advisory boards, and councils. For the purposes of this document, we will refer to the group as an advisory board.

What are the Benefits of Having an Advisory Board?

By bringing community partners to the table, you receive the benefit of their knowledge and expertise. If your MRC is planned by the people who respond in your community, your volunteers will be better integrated into local response. This may open up new opportunities for volunteer activities that you may not have thought of before. By having important stakeholders at the table, you have already developed awareness and buy-in for your MRC unit. The advisors who help you plan and develop the MRC unit have a vested interest in seeing it succeed.

MRC advisory boards can also take on additional roles as appropriate. Some advisory board members may be willing to speak about the MRC at community events. Your advisory board may help make decisions about volunteer screening or serve as the appeals committee for volunteer screening. Advisory board members can also assist in recruiting volunteers or getting the word out about volunteer activities.

Who Should Be on an Advisory Board?

There are several ways to approach the creation of an advisory board. You can look for representation based on one or more of the following characteristics:

- **Geographic Area**—If your MRC unit covers a large geographic area, you may want to ensure that your advisory board has representation from across the area.
- **Expertise**—Choose advisory board members with expertise in particular areas (e.g., medical, communications, legal, financial).
- **Community Partners**—Representation from local response partners keeps the MRC unit in touch with the community and prevents the unit from being too isolated. Because the MRC exists to support local response efforts, the input of other response partners will help ensure that the MRC plans are realistic and that they fit into the overall picture of community response. Potential partners to consider include hospitals, schools, and volunteer centers as well as emergency management, public health, and other agencies that participate in preparedness and response. Having representatives

of these agencies involved in planning for your MRC unit can also help avoid turf battles that arise when organizations perceive that their mission, funding, or volunteers are threatened by another group.

- **Representation of Volunteers and/or the Housing Agency**—You may find that many of the people that you plan to invite to join your advisory board are also potential MRC volunteers. If this is not the case, you may wish to include MRC volunteers in the advisory board to make sure that the volunteer perspective is represented. The housing agency may also want to have representation on the advisory board, but be sure to balance housing agency representation with representation from outside groups.

How Big Should the Advisory Board Be?

You may want to decide at the outset how large your advisory board should be. If your board is too small, it can be difficult to set up meetings with enough attendees to make decisions. If your group is too large, decision making can become a cumbersome process, and group members may feel that their input is not heard. There are no hard-and-fast rules for determining board size.

Using an Existing Group

Some communities already have groups that meet regularly to work on preparedness and response issues. Organizations such as Citizens Corps Councils or the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) are made up of a varied group of community partners with a shared goal. You may wish to approach one of these groups to ask whether they would be willing to help develop the MRC unit (this can be done as part of the regular advisory board meetings to avoid inviting members to additional meetings).

Inviting Members

How you invite members to join your advisory board will influence your success in recruiting and retaining board members. You may want to invite members using a formal letter from the director of your organization or from an identified MRC supporter who is well-known among the people you plan to invite. Potential members will need to have an understanding of what the MRC is, as well as what will be expected of them in terms of time commitment and activities. The initial contact with the potential board member may require follow-up. It may be helpful to set a deadline by which potential members need to notify you of their intent to participate. This will help you in setting the date for your first meeting.

Governance

The formality of MRC advisory boards varies based on the role, the type of housing organization, and the history of the group. If the board is serving as the official board of directors of a nonprofit organization, it will need formal bylaws that meet your state's requirements for incorporation. Most advisory boards can function with less structure. However, it can be

helpful to set forth some guidelines to govern the group. The group may want input on the development of these guidelines, and all members should be oriented to them once they are in place.

Consider the following questions when creating your governance document:

- What is the advisory board's role?
- Does this board have decision making authority, or is it serving in an advisory capacity only (meaning that the housing agency makes decisions based on the direction of the advisory board)?
- How are members chosen?
- How long do members serve?
- How will meetings be scheduled, announced, and conducted?
- Who leads the group (i.e., officers), how are these individuals chosen, and how long do they serve?
- What is expected of members (in terms of attendance at meetings as well as other activities)?
- If the board has decision making authority, what percentage of the membership needs to be present for a vote, and how are votes taken?
- If there are bylaws, how will changes be made?
- Will there be standing and/or ad hoc committees?

Meetings

Before meetings

Before each meeting, identify what issues need to be covered during the meeting. Create an agenda for the meeting, preferably with a rough schedule indicating how long each agenda item should take. Be sensitive to the demands on members' time. Distribute the agenda in advance of the meeting, along with any documents that should be reviewed by members before the meeting. You may wish to obtain RSVPs from members, particularly if there are decisions to be made that will require a quorum (minimum number of participants required for voting). If you are unable to obtain a quorum for the meeting, you may wish to reschedule.

During meetings

Use the agenda to keep the meeting on track. If there are additional items that arise during discussion, they can be dealt with at the end of the meeting or saved for a later date. Keep track of action items that come up in the meeting; note who will be responsible for accomplishing them and when they will need to be completed. You may want to have a large pad of paper (or two) handy for tracking additional items for discussion and action items. If

your group does not have someone whose role it is to take meeting minutes, you will want to assign someone to take minutes for each meeting. Clear, thorough minutes are very important for relaying information to members who were not present as well as for tracking board participation and providing accountability for decisions made or advice given by the board.

After meetings

Distribute minutes to members in a timely manner after the meeting. Members who were not present will appreciate the information, and members who are responsible for the action items discussed in the meeting will appreciate the reminder. Be sure to follow up on action items; you may want to put the deadlines on a calendar to remind you to follow up with the responsible individuals. If your meetings occur less frequently than monthly, you may also want to provide members with updates on the progress of the MRC unit. Informed advisory board members make great supporters for your MRC unit.

By developing an advisory board or other group to provide guidance for your organization, you not only benefit from the expertise of the individuals you recruit, but you also begin to build a community-wide support network for your MRC unit. Incorporating response partners into that network will also help your MRC unit be better integrated into local response plans.

Advisory Board Checklist

- Determine the role of your group: voting (decision making) or advisory-only.
- Determine the size of the group.
- Determine what groups should be represented by considering the following:
 - Geographic area
 - Expertise
 - Community partners
 - Housing agency and/or MRC volunteer representation
- OR—consider using an existing group such as the Citizen Corps Council or LEPC.
- Invite your members and conduct follow up, if necessary.
- Develop a draft governance document, considering the following:
 - How are members chosen?
 - How long do members serve?
 - How will meetings be scheduled, announced, and conducted?
 - Who leads the group, who takes minutes, how are these individuals chosen, and how long do they serve?

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- What is expected of members (in terms of attendance at meetings as well as other activities)?
 - If the board has decision making authority, what percentage of the membership needs to be present for a vote, and how are votes taken?
 - If there are bylaws, how will changes be made?
 - Will there be standing and/or ad hoc committees?
- Set up your first meeting and distribute invitations, the agenda, and supporting documents.
 - Have your first meeting, take minutes, and be sure to track action items.
 - Distribute minutes for your first meeting in a timely manner.
 - Follow up on action items.

Additional Resources

Guidelines for MRC Executive Committee (sample document from 2008 National Conference):
http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov/File/2008_NLC/DayTwo/LiisaJacksonSampleGuidelinesComm.pdf

Sample Executive Committee Recruiting Letter (2008 National Conference):
http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov/File/2008_NLC/DayTwo/LiisaJacksonSampleLetter.pdf

BoardSource.org (some areas of this Web site are members only):
<http://www.boardsource.org>

Community Tool Box—Developing an Ongoing Board of Directors:
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/section_1095.htm

Governance Matters:
<http://www.governancematters.org/>