



Guide to Retention of MRC Volunteers

A Guide for Local MRC Units



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One challenge of managing a program in which volunteers are utilized primarily in emergencies is that volunteers may lose interest during the periods between emergency activations. This creates a “revolving door” in which the unit may lose seasoned volunteers as fast as it can recruit new ones. There are many ways to approach this challenge. For example, many Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) units use training and exercises to keep volunteers engaged. Although these methods are beneficial to the unit, they demand time and resources that may not always be available and may require more time from your volunteers than they can provide.

Fortunately, there are other ways of building retention and recognition in your program that do not require the same investment of time and resources. At the same time, the most common method may also be the most challenging—making the volunteer experience positive from start to finish.

Creating a Positive Volunteer Experience from Start to Finish

There are many ways to ensure that volunteers have a quality experience with your unit. Examine your unit from the volunteer’s perspective and consider the aspects of the volunteer experience that might affect your participation. To optimize the volunteer experience:

1. Ensure a good first impression by handling the application and screening process in an efficient and professional manner.
2. Screen carefully to ensure that your volunteers suit the positions they are filling and that they understand the commitment they are making.
3. Create a course of required training that is helpful and relevant to the volunteer. Offer optional training that enhances the volunteer’s experience and assists them with their current employment (if applicable).
4. Demonstrate professional accountability regarding establishing and following policies that reduce the overall risk of harm for the volunteer and others.
5. Ensure that the volunteers feel well-utilized and that they are making a satisfying contribution. Some volunteers may only wish to serve during an emergency, while others may wish to be involved in ongoing public health initiatives throughout the year (see below and also the [*Guide to Engaging Your MRC Volunteers: Public Health Initiatives*](#)).
6. Provide for the volunteers’ emotional needs during and after utilization. Give them the opportunity to participate in after-action activities—show them the MRC’s commitment to caring for volunteers’ well-being by considering their feedback seriously.
7. Show the volunteers that MRC leadership functions as an advocate with local, state, and Federal government to ensure proper legislation and guidelines for extending protections to volunteers engaged in activities that have some known risk.

Understanding Volunteer Motivation

In addition to having a positive experience and making communities safer and healthier, volunteers may have other, more personal reasons for volunteering.

There are several reasons why people volunteer—these reasons can be loosely grouped into four categories:¹

1. Achievement
2. Affiliation
3. Recognition
4. Power/Leadership

Most volunteers have a combination of reasons why they volunteer. Ensuring that the volunteer experience is rewarding means ensuring there are opportunities where volunteers' needs can be met.

Retaining the Achievement-Motivated Volunteer: Ensure that your unit's volunteers know what they have achieved while updating them on what the volunteers, the unit, and the national MRC program have achieved. Maintain records of volunteer activity and its impact, and remind your volunteers that they are the reason for the unit's successes.

Retaining the Affiliation-Motivated Volunteer: This volunteer needs to know that he or she is part of a bigger organization—the opportunity to train, exercise, and assist at community events as part of the MRC will be attractive to this volunteer. When communicating with volunteers, inform them that their MRC unit is part of a national movement sponsored by the Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). Also, take the opportunity to celebrate the successes of other MRC units in your area. The affiliation-motivated volunteers will enjoy the opportunity to discuss the MRC and demonstrate their affiliation in the community—if you can give them something that identifies them as MRC members, these volunteers will wear it publicly.

Retaining the Recognition-Motivated Volunteer: Although annual awards dinners are not a poor way to thank volunteers, the real work of volunteer recognition occurs daily. There are various ways to recognize volunteers' contributions, ranging from the simple, personal "thank you," to more public forms of recognition such as newspaper articles, community awards, and notes to their families and/or employers. Not all volunteers want to be publicly recognized, but each volunteer needs to know that he or she is valued by the organization (see the [Guide to Recognition of MRC Volunteers](#)).

¹Sources: *Motivation and Organizational Climate*, David C. McClelland and John W. Atkinson, and *The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs*, Marlene Wilson.

Retaining the Power/Leadership-Motivated Volunteer: There should be opportunities for volunteers to assume leadership roles in the unit. When appropriate, delegate responsibilities to volunteers who have appropriate skills and have expressed interest in working on new projects—these leadership-motivated volunteers can be your greatest spokespeople if you utilize them well.

Specific Activities for Keeping Medical Reserve Corps Volunteers Engaged

Community Preparedness

One common expression is that a community is only as prepared as its citizens. Many MRC units are creating a culture of preparedness in their communities through activities such as:

- Safety and preparedness expositions or exhibits at health fairs and other events
- Informational sessions with emergency management professionals
- Press briefings and other public information efforts to disseminate preparedness information

September is National Preparedness Month and is an ideal time to involve your MRC unit in community preparedness activities. Visit <http://www.ready.gov> for more information on community and family preparedness and National Preparedness Month activities.

See also: [*Guide to Engaging Your MRC Volunteers: Community Preparedness*](#)

Public Health Priorities

Because the MRC is housed in the Office of the Surgeon General, it can promote various public health priorities of the Surgeon General and the Department of Health and Human Services. By supporting these priorities, the MRC program will strengthen the nation's health one community at a time.

MRC units nationwide support these priorities through various public health activities such as:

- Health education
- Immunization clinics
- Health screening campaigns
- Participation in events such as Take a Loved One to the Doctor Day
- Participation in community emergency planning efforts

See also: [*Guide to Engaging Your MRC Volunteers: Public Health Initiatives*](#)

Additional Resources

Citizen Corps:

<http://www.citizencorps.gov/>

Corporation for National and Community Service Resources:

<http://nationalserviceresources.org/volunteer-member-staff-management/retention>

Energize, Inc.—for Leaders of Volunteers:

<http://www.energizeinc.com/>

Healthfinder’s National Health Observances Calendar:

<http://www.healthfinder.gov/library/nho/nho.asp>

Lynch, R., & McCurley, S. (2005). *Keeping Volunteers: A Guide To Retention*. Olympia, WA: Fat Cat Publications.

MRC Promising Practices Toolkit for Volunteer Management:

<http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov/PromisingPracticesToolkit.asp?mode=ResourceDetails&ResID=250&RefID=Category&Category=22>

National Preparedness Month:

<http://www.ready.gov/america/npm/index.htm>

Spirit of Service Awards:

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/spiritofservice/index.asp>

Presidential Volunteer Service Awards:

<http://www.presidentialserviceawards.gov/>

Daily Points of Light:

<http://pointsoflight.org/recognition>