



MRC In Touch

Volunteers Building Strong, Healthy, and Prepared Communities

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Featured Article

Training Exercise Helps Volunteers Prepare While Supporting Local Veterans

For the fifth year, the McHenry County Medical Reserve Corps in Illinois has taken part in a volunteer training exercise that also benefits veterans in their community. Called Operation Dropbox, this year the effort resulted in 8,283 pounds of donations supporting about 3,000 veterans and their families. Initially held around the winter holidays, the initiative now takes place each May following feedback from partnering organization Veterans Path to Hope that summer was a more difficult time.

"MRC volunteers have always been a part of Operation Dropbox," said Unit Leader Chrissy Wasson. "We treat it as an exercise, simulating receiving something like PPE from the Strategic National Stockpile. This provides hands-on experience so that volunteers can see what their role would be."



Skills exercised include inventory management and quality control. Volunteers help pick up donations from 31 participating organizations, with volunteers assigned to a pickup location or area. They then check expiration dates on items before the formal exercise day.

On the exercise day, volunteers spend about four and a half hours sorting, picking, and packing donations. Each year 8 to 15 volunteers take part with some returning volunteers and some new volunteers.

"Volunteers are always very excited to participate during the exercise," said Wasson. "They also drop off posters to participating organizations and set up outside local grocery stores to collect donations."

MRC volunteers receive just-in-time training at the start of the exercise and have job action sheets. They complete an evaluation at the end of the exercise.



"It's a great opportunity for team building and a great time," said Bridget Hoffmann, McHenry County Department of Health Emergency Response Coordinator. "We make sure it's also fun. We give a prize to the volunteer who finds the oldest food item."

Those volunteers participating for the second time were given more leadership responsibility.

"This gives us an insight into what they feel comfortable with," said Hoffmann. "Each year it's a way to learn and adapt in the event of an emergency. It's such a great learning opportunity."

The McHenry County Department of Health, the hosting agency for the MRC, works closely with the county's Division of Transportation, who provides space for the exercise and transportation of goods. Hoffmann advises others considering such an exercise to ensure they have a temperature-controlled area to house donations before the event.

Outside of Operation Dropbox, the McHenry County MRC and its 81 volunteers keep active throughout the year. Volunteers assist the local health department with programs and community engagement. One activity is the Cultivating Health Ministry which takes place twice monthly at churches through the county who support underserved populations. Volunteers provide screenings including cholesterol, glucose, and A1C, check height and weight, and provide traffic control. Volunteers also support regular wellness screenings monthly at the local health department and local libraries.

Other activities include assisting the health department's health educator in the community, training county employees in CPR, and assisting with overdose education and response. Just last month volunteers also assisted with a Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC) following a fire at an apartment building. Volunteers served as ambassadors, leading families through to make sure they received the resources they need.

Outside of these activities, the unit hosts quarterly meetings and trainings with other trainings throughout the year as needed. With funding from a [NACCHO Operational Readiness Award](#), unit volunteers also completed a 12-week virtual class in American Sign Language. This was identified as a need during COVID-19 response. The course was offered through the Chicago Hearing Society.

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