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Helping in a disaster

Medical Corps now available in major emergencies

[Christine Smith](#)
News Correspondent

HUBBARDSTON Prevention and education are key in issues that concern public health, but there is also a special training and preparation effort behind the scenes in Hubbardston, should the town or nearby municipalities ever face a disaster or major emergency.

It was in 2002 and not too long after the 9/11 attacks in New York City, that the federal government created the Medical Reserve Corps to activate a body of volunteer medical personnel in cases of natural, manmade, or public health-related emergencies.

The program then began spreading and in 2006, nurse Judie O'Donnell registered and received approval for the creation of a nonprofit unit that to be based in her hometown of Hubbardston, which is now known as the Wachusett Medical Reserve Corps.

O'Donnell said her unit "started with six people around a kitchen table," and no funding for the first few years.

Now, the unit is one of 990 others located throughout the country, and it covers 21 additional towns, including Gardner, Ashburnham, Westminster, Templeton, Phillipston and Winchendon. The group now receives about \$25,000 a year from the Department of Homeland Security, as administered by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Office of Preparedness and Emergency Management, through its Public Health Emergency Preparedness program to help fund training sessions and educational programs through the year for volunteers and others who may be interested.

She said of her unit's 400 volunteers, 75 to 80 percent are medical doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, nurse practitioners, or emergency medical technicians, while the remaining are nonmedical individuals – but, all are ready to be called to action if needed. They count among the 300,000 volunteers nationwide that have become members



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Courtesy photo
Wachusett Medical Reserve Corps members attend a training session.

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of the Medical Reserve Corps.

O'Donnell pointed out that when the 9/11 attacks occurred, the credentials of the many people who responded and claimed to be medical personnel could not be checked, and there were a number of questionable instances that wound up being noted. Members in the Wachusett unit must go through both the unit's and the state's Criminal Offender Record Information check before they can be approved as members in the corps. She said that with their medical credentials also established ahead of time, there is a guarantee that those who arrive on scene during a sudden disaster or event are knowledgeable and can be trusted to provide the proper medical care.

O'Donnell noted that the background checks by the state allow those in the Wachusett unit to assist other units throughout Massachusetts.

She said she and leaders of other units, such as those in the Worcester Regional Medical Reserve Corps and the Greater Grafton Medical Reserve Corps, are dedicated to providing volunteers with an understanding of how they support emergency management leaders. She said the job of the Medical Reserve Corps is to supplement the work of the region's health and emergency agencies, including the local Community Emergency Response Teams, police and fire departments, the boards of health, and others, during emergencies and serious incidents.

O'Donnell is planning a training session to provide volunteers with a clear understanding of how they come under one "Incident Command System" during an emergency, the protocol that is followed, and their proper roles within that chain of command. She works to ensure that training is interesting and provides volunteers with the "applicable tools" necessary in an emergency.

Another upcoming program will include an evening of guest speakers discussing how emergencies are handled in other cultures. She is also planning for a possible upcoming training session in cardiopulmonary resuscitation and first aid.

O'Donnell notes that each incident is different and corps volunteers will assist in whatever way possible, depending on the situation. She said they have provided simple care at first aid stations, to the more detailed work of administering to patients temporarily displaced from their normal locations and housed in shelters due to power outages.

Having medically trained volunteers on hand was crucial when she and members of her corps worked side by side with other government agencies some years ago to administer shots to counteract the H1N1 flu. She said trained eyes have the ability to realize the onset of a sudden reaction, and that, in one particular case, proper care could be administered immediately to a young girl who began experiencing complications after receiving a shot.

O'Donnell said the medical volunteers who have signed on with the Wachusett Medical Reserve Corps and other units in the area are willing to help because they are concerned for the wellbeing of people around them. They offer their assistance "for the love of it," she said, and the corps is always looking for more members. Members can join and do just a single training session a year, or move on to more training opportunities and even work in supervisory capacities. Volunteers may offer what level is comfortable for them, she said, and can amass the training and experience they need as they go.

Volunteers who are not medically trained, she said, also have much to offer. She said these volunteers can be used to help with necessary paperwork, provide childcare under certain circumstances, or simply offer "psychological first aid" by listening to the concerns of those whose lives have unexpectedly become disrupted.

She said corps leaders do get paid small annual salaries or stipends, but must supplement their work for the corps with regular medical positions elsewhere.

O'Donnell notes that in the end, the efforts of the corps aids a community "that strives to be safe, strives to be healthy, and strives to be prepared" and to be "resilient," when faced with a major event. "We've already faced one," she said, noting the ice storm which occurred in 2008.

"That's why the units are here. If you're a nurse, it's part of your nature. It's ingrained in your being," she said. She laughed as she added that to be a nurse, you also must be a "bit of a control freak."

The Wachusett Corps regularly reaches out to the public to bring light to the importance of preparation for potential widespread or personal incidents. She will often speak about individual evacuation kits and the need to fill them with the necessary items such as medications, blankets, batteries, flashlights, crank lanterns, first aid kits, and

even copies of important personal documents.

She will seek out local fairs to set up booths and tables to speak one-on-one with people, and will give talks to local groups and organizations when invited.

For more information, contact O'Donnell at 978-928-3834, by email at wachusettmrc@juno.com, or at the website at www.wachusettmrc.org.

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