



COUNTY BY COUNTY EXTRA

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS



The Georgia East Metro Health District Medical Reserve Corps (MRC GEM) prepare emergency response kits. COURTESY OF MRC GEM PREP KITS

These volunteers are unseen heroes of emergency prep

MRC GEM may help save your life next time disaster hits

By Karen Huppertz | For the AJC

During the next tornado aftermath or pandemic outbreak, a group of very dedicated volunteers could be the ones to help save your life. The Georgia East Metro Health District Medical Reserve Corps, known as MRC GEM, is a nonprofit working closely with the Gwinnett, Newton and Rockdale County health departments, emergency managers and homeland security to prepare for the worst-case scenarios.

The group is part of a nationwide network of over 300,000 volunteers who train to help their local communities during emergencies.

“We’re really in many ways the envy of the other units because we mesh so well with our local health department,” said MRC GEM Executive Director Sherwin Levinson. Sherwin and his wife, Judee, have been a part of the reserve corps 17 and 16 years, respectively.

The organization provides training once a month for anyone willing to apply and join. Volunteers can become CPR and AED certified, learn how to administer Narcan (used during an opioid overdose) or take classes in active shooter training, first aid/triage/stop the bleed, psychological first aid, hazardous material awareness and many more vital topics.

Each year the group also conducts a weekend training summit to tackle more in-depth topics. This past June the group learned how to manage and test for radiation exposure.

During the pandemic, 576 MRC GEM volunteers provided 17,256 hours of

support with approximately 250,000 COVID-19 vaccinations and 125,000 COVID-19 tests. Twenty-nine of those volunteers donated at least 100 hours each.

“That’s the equivalent of about 8.6 full-time employees. Based on the average cost of a public health employee in Georgia, that would be worth over \$730,000,” noted Sherwin.

The group is often called upon by the health department to provide countless hours to lesser-known emergencies. Just prior to the pandemic, volunteers helped conduct massive vaccination clinics during an H1N1 flu outbreak.

Then just before COVID-19, the group was called on short notice to Discovery High School in Lawrenceville to help after a case of tuberculosis emerged on campus.

“Every one of the students, faculty and bus drivers had to be tested,” said Sherwin. “We administered the tests over two days and then returned to read the results.”

Not everything involves direct contact with individuals who might be

sick. There are ways anyone can help. “There are always forms to fill out and lots of paperwork,” Judee said.

Participation happens for many reasons.

“My pat answer is to keep me off the streets,” joked Chief Information Officer Jim Newell. “But I enjoy learning things and challenges and it gives me something to keep sharp.”

“There are all these wonderful people who if given a little leadership and a little direction want to step up and help and have a marvelous array of talents,” Judee stated. “Our paths never would have crossed with some of these people without MRC GEM.”

For each of these volunteers it is a personal desire to empower the readiness of the community.

“My son and three-fourths of my grandchildren live in Gwinnett County,” said Sherwin. “And that’s reason enough.”

No medical experience or training is needed. Learn more, apply to join or donate at www.mrcgem.com.