

100,000 to 200,000 people, hospitalize 700,000, and force up to 40 million outpatient visits and 50 million additional illnesses.¹⁹

New vaccines in the works

In December, the Asian Development Bank projected a bird flu

pandemic could cost \$300 billion, take three million lives, and force a worldwide recession, if not depression. The World Bank put the finishing touches on a \$500 million loan to poor countries to help combat the spread of the bird flu and at the same time estimated that con-

trolling an avian flu pandemic could cost the world's richest countries \$550 billion. The G-8 nations committed to spending \$800 million to \$6 billion to subsidize the purchase of new vaccines against infectious diseases worldwide, which is expected to expand to

Spotlight: The Medical Reserve Corps

by Marna Hoard, MPA, MPH, LT, USPHS

The mission of the Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) is to establish local teams of medical and public health volunteers who focus on strengthening local public health capabilities and preparing communities for emergencies. Launched in July 2002 and housed in the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, the MRC gives medical, public health, and other community volunteers an organized approach to offer their professional skills in support of local public health activities, including emergency response.

MRC volunteers represent various hospital and pre-hospital backgrounds, as well as non-medical professions. Throughout the country MRCs have recognized the need for a wide variety of volunteers to tackle the multitude of health challenges communities face.

MRC leaders are encouraged to adopt an all-hazards approach and more broad-based public health initiatives — specifically, those aligned with the public health priorities of the U.S. Surgeon General, which are to increase disease prevention efforts, enhance emergency preparedness, eliminate health disparities, and improve health literacy. Some examples include:

- An MRC unit working closely with its community partners identifies a large elderly population in the community and recruits volunteers with geriatric expertise to provide health services for them.
- A community with a high prevalence of adolescent asthma focuses on recruiting respiratory therapists for their MRC.
- An MRC in a community with a large Spanish-speaking population may recruit bi-lingual volunteers.

Respiratory therapists can play an integral role in assisting the local MRC unit during crises and in promoting public health initiatives (for example, pulmonary rehabilitation, smoking-cessation

counseling, and case management). During last year's response to Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, large numbers of victims and evacuees needed to be housed in special needs shelters; and respiratory therapists were in high demand. During this response, the Lee County, MS, MRC staffed a triage and first aid station at the local American Red Cross shelter with nurses, respiratory therapists, social workers, and counselors. They processed more than 2,000 evacuees through the triage/first aid area.

There are currently more than 400 MRC units in 49 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam. In addition, more than 70,000 people volunteer nationwide as members of the Medical Reserve Corps.

The MRC National Program Office facilitates the establishment and implementation of MRC units nationwide and functions as a clearinghouse for community information and best practices. Its role is to help communities achieve their local visions for public health and emergency preparedness and response. The Medical Reserve Corps continues to grow as more people discover this resource to help communities become healthier, stronger, and better prepared.

Those interested in establishing an MRC are encouraged to talk to all their community partners (public health, emergency management, hospitals, city government, police, and fire, among others) to fully integrate the MRC and obtain buy-in. For more information on starting an MRC, visit our web site (www.medicalreservecorps.gov) or contact the MRC National Program Office by e-mail (MRCcontact@osophs.dhhs.gov) or phone (301) 443-4951. 🦃

Marna Hoard is the program officer (outreach) for the Medical Reserve Corps Program in the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General.