



Karen Huppertz

Community Voices

Group assists health agencies

If the Chattahoochee River flooded its banks, or let's say a terrorist group succeeded in deploying a dirty bomb, or even if the next flu virus flourished into a pandemic, I'd want to know our public health officials were ready to protect the masses.

The Georgia Division of Public Health is divided into 19 health districts and 159 county health departments. Gwinnett, Newton and Rockdale counties are bundled together as one of those health districts with fewer than 300 employees trained and prepared to provide public health services to a population of approximately 1.2 million, most of whom reside in Gwinnett.

It's not hard for even the math challenged to understand those numbers don't add up well in the event of a catastrophic public health emergency.

But a group of dedicated volunteers are trained to assist those public health officials. The Medical Reserve Corp of Gwinnett, Newton and Rockdale counties provides ongoing training to prepare individuals to assist public health agencies. The organization is sponsored by the U.S. Surgeon General and works in cooperation with public health, emergency management agencies and local hospitals.

The goal of the MRC is to learn and practice how to be safe and secure in a disaster and how to extend that safety and security – first to loved-ones and then to the community. Volunteers, currently 380 of them in the MRC GEM, meet on Saturday mornings once a month for training. Classes range from first aid and CPR training to radiation response training. I've met volunteers as young as 18, and older than 70. Their participation requires a background check and surprisingly, they don't all have some kind of medical background. One is a former FBI sniper. There are electricians, truck drivers, former military personnel, teachers and marketing professionals.

Arnie Zwickel was one of many MRC GEM volunteers who participated in the CDC's efforts to vaccinate the public against the H1N1 flu virus a few years back. I had no idea when I drove through Pinckneyville Park and received my flu shot without even leaving my car that Arnie was one of the volunteers assisting that day.

Recruiting volunteers and finding funding for training are always top priorities, but according to MRC GEM Executive Director Sherwin Levinson, "The toughest thing is teaching people what and what not to be scared of." He and Arnie have convinced me.

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MORE INFORMATION

There are eight medical reserve corps units in the metro Atlanta area. To find one in your community go to www.medicalreservecorps.gov/FindMRC.

To learn more about the MRC GEM serving Gwinnett, Newton and Rockdale counties go to www.mrcgem.org.