

# Volunteer-led Medical Reserve Corps celebrating 16th anniversary of helping the community

By Chris Starrs Staff Correspondent  
Jul 27, 2023



In the event of an untimely community crisis, many caregivers — including police, EMT and hospital personnel — spring into action to offer their expertise and assistance to make a bad situation better.

Volunteers also form a significant presence on the front lines of disaster, and the Medical Reserve Corps covering Gwinnett, Newton and Rockdale counties — also known as MRC GEM — have long offered their varied services to help in times of need.

MRC GEM is celebrating its 16th anniversary in 2023 with some 1,300 members willing to lend a helping hand in the east metro area. According to its website, MRC GEM has saved taxpayers more than \$1 million with its volunteer Strike Teams and during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, administered 375,000 vaccinations and tests and donated 17,256 hours of service to COVID-19 response.

“At that time, the health department had fewer than 300 employees in Gwinnett, Rockdale, Newton counties, covering a population of 1.3 million,” said Judee Levinson, who serves as vice president for logistics for MRC GEM. “They were overwhelmed, and we did around 18,000 volunteer hours in the COVID response. That’s a lot of people. Some folks even ended up being hired by the health department.”

Levinson, who spent 30 years as an attorney before her retirement, said MRC GEM grew out of CERT (Citizens Emergency Response Training) an initiative started by President George W. Bush after 9/11 that eventually fell by the wayside. She said Strike Teams specialize in different tasks, including establishing community reception centers for vaccinations or testing (“Anything where you need to pass through a lot of folks in a small period of time,” she said)

She added that in MRC GEM was on the scene after a tuberculosis break out at Discovery High School in 2019.

“There was an outbreak of TB at Discovery in Lawrenceville and in two days it was necessary to test the entire student body and faculty and selected parents and employees,” she said. “We put a lot of time into that.”

The group hosts training sessions once per month (the next training session is Aug. 19). MRC GEM offers training in CPR and AED, emergency first aid, supporting mass vaccination efforts, hazardous materials awareness and Narcan training, among many other skills. Levinson said about “30 to 35%” of the group’s membership had medical backgrounds.

“There are a lot of folks like me — this isn’t necessarily their calling,” she said, adding that MRC GEM members speaking more than 80 languages. “But we can be trained to do stuff and I’ve been trained to do a lot of stuff in the past 16 years.”

The organization does not have a brick-and-mortar headquarters, but Levinson said federal COVID funds enabled some necessary equipment purchases. The group now rents storage space and office space.

Even though the MRC GEM has a long list of volunteers, Levinson said they’re always looking for new members with an especially keen eye on younger applicants, although she pointed out a volunteer must be at least 18 years old to join.

“Our membership is our success and is part of our challenge,” she said. “Many of us are advancing in age and we’re looking, at this point, at a line of succession and bringing along a new generation.

“We’re trying to build the entire age demographic, specifically the younger demographic. We’re soliciting colleges and universities and nursing schools.”

For more information, visit [www.mrcgem.com](http://www.mrcgem.com).