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New Kind of Emergency Responders

ST ALBANS — Plans to operate a medical surgical/mass care facility at the St. Albans Town Educational Center offer the opportunity for area volunteers to assist in emergency situations right here in their home region.

However, they also can do so right now through the Vermont Emergency Response Volunteers program (VERV), a unique opportunity for regular Vermonters and medical professionals.

VERV volunteers need not having medical training since the program allows volunteers to use their own skills and areas of expertise.

They become part of response team that performs needed tasks such as helping during a flood, major snowstorm, train wreck, or mass pileup on the interstate highway. And, they also help support the operations of public health clinics.

“You do not need to have a profession in the EMS, health, or rescue field to participate,” said Chad Spooner, Public Health specialist, Emergency Preparedness Vermont Department of Health in St. Albans.

“An individual can sign up for VERV and be a truck driver, pilot, waitress, or biologist. The great thing about Vermont and the rest of the United States is that there is never a shortage of volunteers when something happens to our neighbors.”

VERV is an online registration system that validates the credentials of medical personnel and others to better organize and utilize these valuable resources in emergencies and disasters.

Registering with VERV is not a mandatory call to action when help is needed. Instead it is the individual who decides whether he or she is available at the time a call comes to them.

One example is staffing for the H1N1 flu vaccine clinics that have been held annually around the state.

“I tried to go back to the same schools for the children who required the second dose, as building a rapport made it easier for them to trust you the second time around,” said Michelle Garner, a local volunteer. “It was nice to know I was able to help the community in such a large way by using such a little of my time. The appreciation I felt from everyone involved was totally worth it and I would volunteer for anything again.”

Nursing students from the Vermont Technical College Associates Degree program also proved to be a great asset to the H1N1 clinics.

Heather Tanner, R.N., spoke about a clinic at Bellows Free Academy-St. Albans, at which she volunteered “We gave vaccines to hundreds of students and teachers that day,” she said. “It was very nice to be of assistance and it was a great educational experience as well.”

While it can be said that without the help of VERV volunteers like Michelle and Heather, the vaccination clinics would not have been such a success, the H1N1 flu clinics are only a small part of the VERV picture.

According to Spooner, the Vermont Department of Health, Northwestern Medical Center, New Hampshire and Vermont Red Cross, Vermont Emergency Management, and the New England

Center for Emergency Preparedness are working with St. Albans Town Educational Center as well as the City and Town of St. Albans to help establish and plan a Medical Surgical/Mass Care facility at the Town School.

“The purpose of the plan,” said Spooner, “is to provide an operational framework for the activation, operation, and deactivation of a regional medical-surgical/mass care facility to provide critical supplemental capacity to the mass care shelter and healthcare systems within the state.”

He added, “The facility may be utilized to provide mass care services, medical- surgical support, or a combination of the two. VERV volunteers would be instrumental in providing support for this effort.”

In the aftermath of 9/11 most town fire departments and rescue squads have implemented mass casualty plans in the event of a disaster.

A mass casualty event requiring volunteer assistance can be something like a train wreck involving an Amtrak passenger train or a motor vehicle accident on the interstate that involves multiple cars and a bus are a couple of possible examples

“The Vermont Department of Health (also) has an agreement with several facilities in Franklin and Grand Isle counties to use them as a Point of Distribution (POD) to distribute medication or vaccines to prevent the spread of illness or disease in the larger population,” said Spooner of VERV volunteers.

He added, “In order to undertake such an action, we would look to volunteers to help support the PODs. Based on skill level and qualifications volunteers might be assigned to hand out information, direct traffic, administer medications or help with clinic flow.”

Becoming a member of VERV volunteer is as easy as going to the Vermont Emergency Response Volunteers website (<http://healthvermont.gov/emerg/verv/index.html>) and signing up. Health care professionals should have their licensing credentials handy.