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Countywide emergency response team forming

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August Kryger | Courier-Times

Widespread medical emergencies can strike at almost any time. An outbreak of a new strain of virus or another type of disaster could cripple a city.

If any of these happened in Sedro-Woolley, there wouldn't be enough trained medical staff to deal with the problem. That's why the Skagit County Medical Reserve Corps is in the process of being created.

The corps' focus will be on getting the public ready for any potential disaster that might occur. Donna Smith, director of the new reserve corps, sent out nearly 900 letters last summer to all medical personnel within the county who might be of some help during a disaster situation.

"We had about 200 responses to the letters," Smith said. "This is so encouraging, even if only a few of them are actually able to help."

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Important role

Smith said part of the reason the corps is so important is because disaster responders need a unified mode of communication.

Those who want to be a part of the program will be required to take tests to make sure they understand terminology used to manage the potential crisis, as well as understand the chain of command, she said.

"Experience has shown that people don't communicate well during a disaster," Smith said. "This way, we're all on the same page."

Smith said the group will require trained volunteers, because having people walk on during an emergency usually only adds to the confusion.

"When you get untrained volunteers, trained staff have to be pulled off the line to tell them where to go and what to do," she said. "We want to have as many people trained in advance as possible so that when those events pop up, they will be able to walk in there and go to work."

The program was given \$10,000 in grant money from the National Association of County and City Health Officials. The funds are enough to get the program

going, but Smith said the corps will have to look for additional funding to keep it in operation once the initial steps are completed. She said they will look for more grants, as well as support from various private and public organizations.

Smith said recruiting is currently directed at medical care professionals because they are the most critical to having a prepared response team.

Once the medical volunteers are established, the corps will be open to a variety of individuals within the community, she said.

"If we have a disaster, we would open up a site and need people to do paperwork, security, traffic control and a variety of people doing all kinds of roles."

Corps goals

Dorothy Downes was hired to be the coordinator of the corps for Skagit County. Right now, she's in the process of getting a handbook together that will outline the goals of the corps as well as various duties for those involved.

Smith said Downes is the perfect candidate for the job, and is already working hard to get the corps up and running. Downes has an extensive history working in public health, including a stint in Washington D.C. writing and affecting government health policies. She's also worked for the U.S. Navy, developing and implementing a health promotion program.

She said she became involved with the corps as a natural extension of her drive to help the common good.

"My personal belief is that a healthy community is a happy place to live," Downes said. "This is an exciting challenge and a way for me to go back to my roots of public health."

She said part of her role will be to address a crisis logically and deal with it in a professional and orderly way.

"To think about crisis before it happens is an abstract conceptual thing; to think about it after it happens is also abstract, so we're trying to think about both ends of that experience so we can anticipate and be as prepared as we can be," Downes said.