



Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service

NEWS RELEASE

Contact:
Judy Rensberger
301-731-9080
301-524-1399 (cell)

8201 Corporate Drive, Suite 200, Landover, Maryland 20785 • (301) 731-9080 • FAX (301) 731-9084

Hurricane Response

U.S. Public Health Service's Commissioned Corps: Example of 'What Went Right'

Landover, MD., Oct. 4—As the U.S. Congress begins to examine the federal response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita—"what went wrong and what went right"—it should pay particular attention to the prompt, disciplined, and highly professional performance of the 1,050 emergency medical responders deployed by the U.S. Public Health Service under the command of U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona.

That suggestion comes from Captain Gerard M. Farrell, U.S. Navy (Ret.). He is Executive Director of the Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service, a membership organization of 7,500 active-duty, retired, and reserve officers of the uniformed service known as the Public Health Service (PHS) Commissioned Corps.

In position before Katrina hit

Two days before Hurricane Katrina actually struck the Gulf coast, members of the PHS Commissioned Corps were on the ground, setting up the very first field hospital (at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge) and then fanning out in small medical strike teams to scores of sites in the affected states.

With 1,050 USPHS officers eventually deployed, the PHS Commissioned Corps has continued to set up and staff field hospitals and emergency medical clinics, treat sick and injured evacuees, conduct disease surveillance, and work closely with local and state health authorities to plan for long-term public health needs.

PHS officers on the front lines

In addition to caring for evacuees, PHS clinicians have been treating exhausted police, firefighters, shelter staff, and animal rescue workers. PHS veterinarians have been staffing pet shelters, caring for thousands of rescued dogs, cats, horses, and other animals. PHS forensic specialists have been embedded with disaster mortuary operations response teams, helping to recover human remains and staff makeshift morgues. Still other PHS officers have been staffing walk-in family assistance centers for hurricane victims who are looking for their missing (and feared dead) relatives.

Finally, in the words of Surgeon General Carmona, PHS officers are “providing rest and respite for those who have been on the front lines for three weeks or more.”

The collective performance of these PHS officers, Farrell said, is “the untold success story of these back-to-back disasters—an example of something that went exactly right.”

Getting the story out

The need to get this story out, Farrell said, was underscored by comments from a U.S. Senator on the MSNBC “Hardball” broadcast that aired on Tuesday, Sept. 27. Senator George Allen (R-VA), a guest on the show hosted by veteran journalist Chris Matthews, suggested that the U.S. Surgeon General and PHS Commissioned Corps are a wasteful federal program that should be cut. “They’re not a surgeon, they’re not a general, they’re just a nanny.” Although the nanny remark is attributed in MSNBC’s transcript to moderator Chris Matthews, it was actually uttered by Sen. Allen and confirmed the next day by his communications director, John Reid.

Farrell called the remarks “completely ignorant and uninformed.” He said that documentation of the performance of the PHS Commissioned Corps is contained in a series of situation reports issued by the Surgeon General. Although these reports have been circulated within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and e-mailed to PHS officers at duty stations in the U.S. and around the world, they have not been publicized. “They deserve a wider audience,” Farrell said.

207-year history

The history of the U.S. Public Health Service dates back to 1798, when it was chartered by Congress during the Presidency of John Adams. It was originally known as the Marine Hospital Service, and its mission was to provide health care for U.S. sailors who were sick, injured, disabled, or destitute.

Today, the PHS Commissioned Corps is a uniformed service of 6,000 active-duty officers, all of whom are medical professionals trained to respond rapidly to hazards and disasters of all kinds. The Corps includes physicians, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, environmental health scientists, dietitians, mental health specialists, veterinarians, and epidemiologists.

The leader of the Commissioned Corps, Vice Admiral Richard Carmona, is a surgeon and public health physician with decades of hands-on experience in emergency medical response management. Admiral Carmona is also a decorated combat veteran who served in Vietnam as a member of the U.S. Army’s Special Forces. In 2002, President Bush selected him to serve as the nation’s 17th U.S. Surgeon General.

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