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Public Health Service Commissioned Corps Adopts New Mission Statement

After two years of study, U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona today unveiled a new mission statement for the uniformed cadre of public health professionals he leads. "Protecting, promoting, and advancing the health and safety of the Nation" is the new Commissioned Corps mission. This broad mission will be achieved through "rapid and effective response to public health needs, leadership and excellence in public health practices, and the advancement of public health science."

In announcing the new mission, Rear Admiral Cristina V. Beato, the Acting Assistant Secretary for Health, and the Surgeon General note this is an important step in moving forward with the planned "transformation" of the Corps. The Commissioned Corps is a highly trained cadre of 6,000 uniformed officers who are experienced, mobile health professionals working throughout the Department of Health and Human Services as well as other federal agencies. Along with the five Armed Services and officers of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the PHS Commissioned Corps is one of the seven federal Uniformed Services.

The new mission provides formal recognition for what has been, since 9/11, an expanding role in emergency medical response for the entire Corps. Beato and Carmona noted that "we have all been carrying out our responsibilities in support of this mission." Most recently, several hundred Corps officers were sent on short notice to Florida to provide emergency public health assistance in the wake of the September hurricanes. Corps officers are also serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and onboard the hospital ship *USNS Mercy* in support of tsunami relief efforts in Indonesia.

The revised mission also underscores the important role of this little known Corps of health professionals in providing expert public health leadership for the Nation. Not too many years ago, the top leadership positions throughout the federal Public Health Service, at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, the National Institutes for Health in Bethesda and others, were filled by uniformed officers of the Commissioned Corps of the PHS. Many of these federal agencies were founded by Corps officers decades ago. Today, only the Indian Health Service still has a uniformed Corps officer as its Director in RADM Chuck Grim.

Today's PHS Commissioned Corps is a far cry from the centralized and dominant public health service it once was. In order to effectively execute the first part of its new mission – rapid and effective response – the Corps will have to be thoroughly overhauled. A new centralized force management system under the direct control and authority of the Surgeon General will have to be established.

The new mission statement is an important beginning in the process of transforming this important national resource; but it is only a beginning. Now the real work of transforming the Corps must begin in earnest – determining requirements to fulfill the mission and then matching them against available resources. A daunting, but vitally important task.

The COA is the professional association comprised of active duty and retired members of the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service.

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