

# 20 YEARS OF HERO

**University of Minnesota  
Health Emergency Response Office  
20th Anniversary Report**

# Table of Contents

Letters from Leadership	1
About HERO	3
Our History	5
Impact by the Numbers	7
Response and Deployment Highlights	9
Excellence and Accolades	13
Looking Back and Moving Forward: 2023 and Beyond	15
Contact Us	16

# Letter from the Director



Sometimes, when we are really lucky, the stars line up just so, and magic happens. Things fall into place in a way you never dreamt possible. That's what happened 20 years ago with the birth of the Health Emergency Response Office (HERO) and the University of Minnesota Medical Reserve Corps (U of M MRC). Assessments on our campus and at the national level identified gaps in health-related response readiness. The country was still reeling from the devastating events of 9/11 and subsequent bioterrorist anthrax attacks. As one of the largest urban campuses in the nation, our Twin Cities campus faced the same challenges as any large city. Importantly, our campus housed a wealth of interdisciplinary, experienced personnel able to rise to meet these challenges. So in 2004, the University of Minnesota took action to ensure readiness for health emergencies on our campus and to prepare our unique workforce to provide service to the state when needed. You can read more about the many "stars" that aligned at that time on [page 5](#) of this anniversary report.

Since its establishment, HERO has worked primarily behind the scenes to prepare for and respond to a multitude of public health issues. On [page 7](#), you can find a list of the health responses coordinated by our department. We are fortunate to have a dream team in the HERO office with "boots on the ground" public health practice experience at the state, county, city, non-governmental organization, and international levels.

HERO's largest and most visible program is the U of M MRC. This national program was created to address rapid response gaps revealed during 9/11. It was the perfect platform for our health sciences schools to engage in readiness work, so we were one of the first applicants for the program. In those early days, the University of Minnesota joined the MRC program knowing we had something important to offer – the largest collection of health faculty, staff, and students in Minnesota – and a commitment to serving both our campus and the broader community. As co-founder of the U of M MRC with Dr. Frank Cerra, I honestly was unsure in 2004 if this idea would take flight. We believed that our health sciences community could be of service during emergencies. We also believed that service would provide unique, interdisciplinary educational and experiential opportunities for those students, staff, and faculty. As I look back on the last two decades, the impact of our members has exceeded my wildest dreams. This report includes highlights from our earliest to most recent deployments, both on our campus and in the community ([pages 9-12](#)).

My sincere thanks to all of our U of M MRC members, HERO staff, and partners on this anniversary milestone. Here's to the next 20 years!

## **Jill M. DeBoer, MPH**

Director, Health Emergency Response Office  
Deputy Campus Public Health Officer  
Director of Public Health Practice, Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy  
Adjunct Faculty, School of Public Health  
University of Minnesota

# Letter from the MRC Manager



In public health, we focus on the health and well-being of communities locally, nationally, and internationally. As we celebrate and reflect on our 20 years of service, I want to focus on our community: the students, staff, and faculty that make up the membership of our University of Minnesota Medical Reserve Corps. More than any community I know, our MRC is filled with people who are caring, selfless, and united in a common mission to respond to the physical and mental health impacts of emergencies on campus and in our greater community. Our members exemplify the University's commitment to service and innovation by lending their time and skills, often without public awareness or recognition, to respond to emergencies in profound and often incalculable ways.

As of January 2024, there are 2216 members, one of the largest in the country. Our members range from undergraduate students to world-renowned faculty. They are scholars, researchers, leaders, practitioners, administrators, and support staff. Our members ensure that the MRC operates according to our values of: preparedness, outreach and public service, physical and mental health, partnerships and collaboration, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and data-driven response. Among MRC units, ours is unique for its inclusion of students, providing them with practical opportunities to apply the skills they are learning in their academic clinical programs. Many say it has been one of the best parts of their educational experience. We, in turn, benefit from their unique perspectives, talents, excitement, and optimism.

Over the past 20 years, our members have responded to all types of disasters. We continue to look ahead to other emerging infectious diseases as well as threats to our community like mass casualty and fatality incidents, mental health crises on campus, and the public health impacts of the climate crisis. Planning for and responding to these incidents requires dedicated and diverse teams capable of looking at these issues through multiple lenses. We have so much to be proud of over the past 20 years, and I am looking forward to all we can do in the next 20+ years.

## Courtney Wetternach, MPH

Manager, Medical Reserve Corps  
University of Minnesota



# About HERO

The Health Emergency Response Office (HERO) has system-wide responsibilities to ensure:



Efficient and effective response to health incidents and emergencies affecting the University community.



Coordinated mobilization of health sciences students and personnel to assist during emergencies.



Minimal disruption to clinical and health science research enterprises during an emergency response.

“HERO is such an asset to our Crookston campus and the entire University. They have historically provided us with accurate, timely, and consistent information on all health matters, and were true heroes to us particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. They had extensive outreach across the state in all five campuses and connections outside the Metro area to ensure concerns and needs of all Minnesotans were heard. We look forward to another 20 years of collaboration with HERO.”

**Mary Holz-Clause**  
Chancellor, University of  
Minnesota Crookston

## Incident and Emergency Response

HERO is integrated into the University and MHealth-Fairview response systems, receiving 24/7 notification of all real, potential, or perceived health emergencies on campus. Personnel follow response protocols for determining the need for additional internal and external notifications and appropriate response actions. HERO manages the following resources and partnerships to respond to incidents:

- Campus Public Health Officer/Deputy Campus Public Health Officer designations
- Health Operations Team
- Health Department Operations Center
- Safe Campus Health Emergencies website and electronic communications
- System campus health emergency response coordination
- Regional mutual aid agreements
- Liaison to MHealth-Fairview, Community-University Health Care Center, Boynton Health, and Dental School clinics
- Liaison to the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), and other relevant city and county health departments and/or other health systems



## Planning

HERO develops campus-level plans for various health emergency scenarios, and participates in broader campus planning efforts representing physical and behavioral health emergency response expertise and resources:

- Outbreak and pandemic response
- Point of Dispensing Sites (PODS)
- BSL-3 Laboratory emergency response and communications
- Medical station team
- Mass casualty and fatality response including witness support, reunification, and campus assistance center plans

## Training and Education

Undergraduate and Graduate education: in partnership with CIDRAP and the School of Public Health, HERO staff teach courses on infectious disease threats and public health emergency preparedness.

UMN Prepared: open to all students, staff and faculty on the Twin Cities campus on personal preparedness topics such as CPR, First Aid, Stop the Bleed and more.

Online training modules and courses: In partnership with the School of Public Health Continuing Education and Outreach, HERO staff have developed courses available to public health practitioners across the state.

## University of Minnesota Medical Reserve Corps

HERO is home to the University of Minnesota Medical Reserve Corps (U of M MRC), comprised of students, staff, and faculty from health sciences schools, Boynton Health, Student Counseling Services, and select other programs. The U of M MRC provides both clinical and non-clinical response capabilities.

### U of MRC Mission

The mission of the University of Minnesota Medical Reserve Corps is to serve as a diverse and inclusive membership of faculty, staff, and students that provides both physical and mental health support during and after an emergency on campus or in the community. With a focus on excellence and subject matter expertise, we continuously enhance our skills, knowledge, and resources that contribute to a strong, healthy, and prepared U.

# Our History

HERO and U of M MRC were established in 2004 following a series of events at the campus and national level. The events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent anthrax attacks through the mail shone a light on the need for a more prepared nation. In particular, there was a need for a system to pre-identify and train health professionals available for rapid response. The Office of the Surgeon General created the MRC program to meet that need. At the same time, the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities (UMN-TC) campus had just completed an assessment of responses to “white powder” concerns on campus in 2001 and a near outbreak of meningococcal disease. Results from this assessment revealed:

- UMN-TC is home to an impressive and highly skilled collection of staff devoted to ensuring the health of the campus community from a wide variety of units (housing, food, health care, safety, etc.) However, there was a need for 1) centralized coordination among those partners during emergencies, and 2) designation of a single senior leader with oversight of health response efforts given that resources are distributed across the campus in separate units and departments
- There was a unique opportunity for UMN-TC to support responses on campus and in the community given the six health sciences schools. Faculty, staff, and students in those schools represent the largest collection of health professionals (licensed and in training) in Minnesota.

“Public health scenarios can be complicated and winding processes, and Hennepin County has come to value and rely on our partnership with the HERO team for successful responses at the University of Minnesota. Their thoughtfulness, efficiency, and curiosity demonstrates a deep understanding of the campus body and a desire to create a healthy, safe environment for all.”

**Kelzee Tibbetts**

Epidemiologist, Hennepin County Public Health



The University of Minnesota took action by establishing

- 1) a senior-level Campus Public Health Officer position;
- 2) the Health Emergency Response Office to support that senior leader and the campus in areas related to preparedness and response to health emergencies; and
- 3) the U of M MRC as a platform for engaging students, staff, and faculty in the health sciences.

The U of M MRC received federal recognition from the Office of the Surgeon General on April 29, 2004. It is the fourth in the nation out of over 700 MRC programs to date and one of only a handful on college campuses.



## Our Commitment to Whole-Person Health The Disaster Behavioral Health Collaborative

The UMN Disaster Behavioral Health Collaborative was convened and facilitated by the U of M MRC beginning in 2016, to bring together partners working in mental and behavioral health across the campus, for the purpose of planning and coordinating resources in the absence of an emergency. The group has included partners from Boynton Mental Health, Student Counseling Services, and faculty in areas such as Family Social Science. Beginning in 2024, MRC Manager Courtney Wettenschall will lead a new strategic visioning process with this group to examine and adapt to the evolving and growing mental health needs on campus.





# HERO Impact

## We've Conducted

30+

EXERCISES &  
DRILLS

33

INCIDENT  
RESPONSES

## We've Planned for and Responded to



NATURAL  
DISASTERS



COMMUNITY  
TRAGEDY



16+  
PATHOGENS &  
CHEMICALS



STRUCTURAL  
COLLAPSE



ACTIVE  
THREATS OF  
VIOLENCE

- SARS-CoV-2
- Influenza
- Meningitis
- Ebola
- Zika
- Anthrax
- Norovirus
- Tuberculosis
- Measles

- Mumps
- Hepatitis A
- Varicella
- Rabies
- Mpox
- Ethylene Glycol
- Residential "Black Mold"



LARGE-SCALE  
EVENTS

## We've Trained

400+

Students in UMN public health courses

306

Students, staff, and faculty taught through UMN Prepared

14,000+

People through courses co-developed by HERO and the School of Public Health Continuing Education and Outreach Program

# Spotlight on the U of M MRC

**2,216**   
TOTAL MEMBERS



**56**  
ACTIVATIONS

**204** FACULTY



MINNESOTA, IOWA, &  
LOUISIANA

**323** STAFF

STATES

**1689** STUDENTS



HENNEPIN, RAMSEY, SCOTT,  
MOWER, ST. LOUIS, CROW  
WING, & LYON

MN COUNTIES

## **7** Specialized Response Teams



BEHAVIORAL  
HEALTH



LOGISTICS



MEDICAL  
STATION



PHARMACY



VACCINES



VETERINARY  
MEDICINE



WITNESS  
SUPPORT

"I feel privileged to be a part of the MRC. It's all about community and relationships!"

**Laura Kirk**  
Clinical Associate Professor, UMN



# Response and Deployment Highlights



**2004 First MRC Deployment:** Approximately 35 MRC members were deployed to support a state health department hotline about annual influenza vaccine shortages. The hotline was in operation for 31 business days and received 1,712 calls on its peak utilization day.

**2005 Hurricane Katrina and Rita Response:** A total of 68 U of M MRC members traveled to the Gulf Coast Region to provide primary health care, public health, and behavioral health support to victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. As a team, we assisted with the massive incident command and support activities over three months.



**2007 35W Bridge Collapse:** The U of M MRC deployed 22 members to aid in medical and behavioral health efforts in the hours and days following the 35W Bridge collapse. The Behavioral Health Response Team responded immediately to the UMMC emergency department and family assistance center the night of the collapse and continued their support at the City of Minneapolis family assistance center. Additional U of M MRC members provided basic medical services including over-the-counter medications, prescriptions, wound care, and more. In total, seven nurses and six physicians provided medical station coverage at the family assistance center.

**2008 Animal Rescue Shelter, Cedar Rapids, Iowa:** Veterinary Medicine Response Team members deployed to aid in an animal rescue shelter following severe flooding around Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Three teams consisting of College of Veterinary Medicine veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and students were deployed for periods of 3-5 days. Approximately 700 small animals were housed and cared for during peak shelter operations.



## 2008 Guinness World Record for Flu Shots:

Members were deployed on campus to provide influenza vaccinations at one of five day-long, mass immunization sites. 85 members were deployed at that site providing a total of 11,543 vaccinations.



**2011 North Minneapolis Tornado:** Behavioral Health Strike Team members assisted in the aftermath of a tornado in North Minneapolis.



## Exercises

HERO and U of M MRC members plan and participate in emergency response exercises on our campus and in the community.

### Tabletop Exercises

- HERO has developed and facilitated tabletop exercises on campus for bioterrorism (anthrax), pandemic influenza, radioactive dispersal devices, and meningitis B.
- HERO participates in annual campus Department of Emergency Management drills covering a variety of topics such as ice storms and natural gas leaks.
- In the last 20 years, HERO has participated in tabletop exercises hosted by local and state emergency response partners covering airline crashes, chlorine leaks, Yersinia pestis, earthquakes, bioterrorism, radiological dispersal devices, and intentional water supply contamination.

### Drills and Full-scale Exercises

- HERO has developed and implemented drills of Point of Dispensing Site operations for both oral medication and vaccine distribution, rapid medication repackaging, and set-up for a reunification and family assistance center.
- HERO has participated in full-scale exercises hosted by the campus Department of Public Safety for active shooter, train derailment, and bomb threat scenarios.
- Full-scale exercises hosted by local and state emergency response partners have included response following the simulated structural collapse of a large entertainment venue.



## Pandemic Planning and Response

**H1N1 Influenza and COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2):** From 2005-2007, HERO led extensive campus wide-planning and exercise processes to prepare for pandemic influenza, later responding to the H1N1 Pandemic Influenza from 2009-2010. Starting in 2020, HERO personnel served in a leadership role to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In both pandemics, HERO provided coordination to ensure an effective, efficient, and coordinated response over an extended period of more than 12 and 36 months, respectively. HERO facilitated, led and implemented efforts in the following areas:



### *Coordination*

- Weekly Health Operations Team meetings.
- In-person (H1N1) and in-person, then virtual (COVID) department health operations center.
- Liaise with MDH weekly, sometimes daily, to convey the unique challenges and opportunities of higher education to the state.



### *Planning*

- Multi-level and evolving response plans for vaccination, masking, testing, exposure notification, isolation and quarantine, cluster response, and situational awareness.
- Residence Hall health and safety plans, including for self isolation, with Housing and Residential Life, MDining, and Boynton Health.
- Mass vaccination planning and implementation with Boynton Health to vaccinate tens of thousands of students, staff, faculty and dependents.

*“The University of Minnesota’s Health Emergency Response Office (HERO) was so essential to not only the University and the state of Minnesota, but to the world during something so complex, challenging, and unpredictable as COVID-19. Under the unwavering leadership of Director Jill DeBoer and her team, we had sound procedures in place, access to the best medical and public health information anywhere, and around the clock support. I, and countless others, will forever be grateful for their incredible work and commitment to keep our community safe and well.”*

**Joan T.A. Gabel**  
Chancellor, University of Pittsburgh;  
University of Minnesota President  
(2019-2023)



### Communications

- Awareness of issues and plans to campus leaders, including the President, Campus Public Health Officer and Emergency Management Policy Committee.
- Communications coordination for campus-wide messages and web-based information systems.
- Presentations and briefings to numerous internal and external partners, senior leaders and governance groups our campus plans and response.



### Technical Assistance

- Worked with the Provost's Office on assessment of academic policies, information and support to faculty. Review of study abroad program issues with GPS Alliance.
- Support Human Resources to answer employee questions and concerns consistently and accurately.
- Technical assistance, coordination, and support to the system campus chancellors health partners for each campus.

“HERO has been an indispensable partner to the Minnesota Department of Health for the past 20 years. HERO has enabled efficient and effective bi-directional communication by establishing a single point of contact at the University for public health issues. Campus public health officers have proven their skill in preparedness and response to multiple emerging and high consequence pathogens, such as pandemic influenza, meningococcus, Ebola, measles, tuberculosis, and COVID-19. HERO has strengthened the University of Minnesota community and public health preparedness in Minnesota.”

#### Ruth Lynfield

State Epidemiologist and Medical Director, Minnesota Department of Health



# Excellence and Accolades

## State of Louisiana recognition of efforts following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita:

On November 5, 2005, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco released an official statement recognizing the U of M MRC for “outstanding and unparalleled service to the people of Louisiana following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.”

## Presidential recognition for Hurricane Katrina and Rita Response:

On August 22, 2006, President George W. Bush awarded U of M MRC with the President’s Volunteer Service Award in recognition of its members’ work in Louisiana. MRC member and then-medical student David Jewison, who spent two weeks on the response, received the award on behalf of the MRC in a ceremony with President Bush.

## State of Iowa recognition of veterinary support in the wake of flooding:

In 2008, the U of M MRC received a Certificate of Recognition from the Iowa Secretary of Agriculture for valuable contributions and efforts during the Iowa floods. From the Iowa State Veterinarian: “Your contributions helped lead to the success of the care that was given to pets and understanding shown to the owners and their families. You provided a very special service to many people who lost their homes and possessions. Many found joy and reassurance when reunited with their pets. The value of this service is difficult to measure.”



## 2019 National MRC Innovator Award

**Award:** In 2019, HERO was jointly awarded the National MRC Innovator Award with University of Minnesota Police Department (UMPD) for creation of the MRC Witness Support Team. This unique and specialized team responds in partnership with the UMPD to provide immediate emotional, psychological, and basic needs support to witnesses of mass casualty events. The Innovator Award honors an MRC unit that has initiated and carried out a novel and innovative activity that has helped build on MRC unit and housing organization efforts, engaged unit volunteers in the process, and contributed to strengthening the community's public health, preparedness, and response infrastructure.

## 2023-2025 MRC STTRONG Award:

The MRC - State, Territory and Tribal Nations, Representative Organizations for Next Generation (MRC-STTRONG) Award is a one-time funding opportunity using federal COVID funds. MDH partnered with the U of M MRC to secure \$2.46 million for the State. Funds designated for the University will support projects with state-wide reach, including:

- Development of a minimum standard training curriculum for all MRC units in the state.
- Training and technical support to Minnesota MRC unit leaders to implement and evaluate these curricula.
- Development and production of MRC orientation resources and video for all units in the State.

“HERO has been a guiding light for on campus housing through many public health incidents. The best in class excellence of guidance has supported our residents through several public health crises including norovirus outbreaks and a global pandemic. HERO guidance has proven to effectively address public health issues while ensuring excellent stewardship of university resources. I feel reassured that the HERO team is “at the ready” and only a phone call away!”

**Susan Stubblefield**

Director, Housing & Residential Life, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities





# Looking Back and Moving Forward: 2023 and Beyond

Our spirit of innovation and service continued in 2023: we welcomed new staff, embarked on new partnerships, and expanded our outreach and communication efforts. Here are a few of the highlights:

- New staff and partnerships: Oona Beall joined our staff to spearhead the new STTRONG collaboration with MDH. Her expertise in training and curriculum development will support statewide MRC training and orientation needs.
- Training 2.0: After nearly three years of disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic, we were excited to return to in-person training for UMN Prepared and a special MRC training series on Disaster Behavioral Health.
- With Gratitude...We wished Kathy Berlin a happy and well-deserved 'retirement' as she transitioned from 16 years as the MRC Director to her passion for landscaping and gardening. We are grateful for her leadership and efforts to develop one of the premier MRC units in the country.
- We're Social! We entered the social media space this year! Find us on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and X/Twitter...and coming soon to TikTok!
- Recruitment and outreach: In addition to our social media ventures, we unveiled new branding and recruitment materials, including our MRC Recruitment Video!
- We welcomed and on-boarded 101 new members between January 1st and December 31st, 2023.



# Join. Connect. Support.



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