

Building on the past, preparing for the future
by Jane Palmer

Nancy McKelvey, RN, MSN, was attending a nursing conference in Reston, Va., on Sept. 11, 2001, when she heard the devastating news. McKelvey, chief nurse of the American Red Cross, used her cell phone to check with her staff at national headquarters to determine the needs of the Red Cross in response to the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 in Pennsylvania.

Because some roads to Washington were closed to incoming traffic, McKelvey could not report to Red Cross headquarters immediately. For her, it was a time of frustration rather than panic.

“You know, if you work for the Red Cross, you want to be in the middle of things,” McKelvey said. “But one of the very encouraging, heartwarming pieces of waiting there was being with colleagues who, when they found they couldn’t get out of D.C. that day, volunteered to come and work at the Red Cross.”

Among the nursing leaders attending the conference was Nancy Dickenson-Hazard, chief executive officer of the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International. She recalled that McKelvey was calm and focused while explaining how the nursing leaders in attendance might help.

“I was very impressed not only with her speed of putting things in motion, but also her drive and compassion in doing so,” Dickenson-Hazard said. “Everyone was concerned about their personal circumstances, but Nancy was more concerned about the victims and national circumstances. She was quite selfless in her immediate actions.”

After returning to her office in Washington, McKelvey helped manage blood drives at headquarters. The outpouring of response to early pleas for blood donation resulted in long waits for volunteers, many of whom were first-time donors.

“We were dealing with the mental health needs of the people in line,” McKelvey said. “People had an overwhelming need to feel like they were helping. So although we were trying to encourage people to come back in a few days or weeks, these people needed to do something right then.”

Over the next 10 days, McKelvey helped arrange training for spontaneous volunteers who had not been involved in disaster relief before Sept. 11.

The days following the attacks were exhausting. The Red Cross team members ran on adrenaline, McKelvey said, somehow finding the resources to continue their work. Much of her time was spent collaborating with Red Cross leadership, including the Disaster Services health staff, regarding ways to quickly identify, recruit and train nurses to assist with disaster relief efforts. For example, one key activity was the establishment of a Red Cross national nursing and medical volunteer hotline, which received more than 1,400 calls over a 10-day period. Other activities included working with national nursing associations to train and mobilize volunteers for specific jobs, such as responding to an information hotline.

“The disaster has created a lot of new work and opportunities for us, but it’s building on what we do every day,” she added.

McKelvey, who lives in Bethesda, Md., with her husband, Neal, was named chief nurse in 1997. A graduate of the Johns Hopkins Hospital School of Nursing, the University of Pennsylvania and The Catholic University of America, she is a former faculty member of Georgetown University School of nursing. She has held management positions with several

health-care organizations, including the National Health Screening Council and ASPO/Lamaze, and is past chair of the Federal Nursing Services Council. Her Red Cross experience includes working in human resources, serving as an international technical delegate for the Red Cross-American Hospital Association Turkmenistan project, and heading the Red Cross International Medical Advisory Group.

McKelvey's broad-based background helped her develop skills—such as recruiting, marketing and public speaking, as well as community organization and management—that are essential to her present leadership role.

Revitalizing Red Cross nursing

A major goal for McKelvey is revitalizing Red Cross nursing to strengthen its impact on communities. One way she has worked to achieve this goal is by establishing a nursing infrastructure. Nurses are involved at all levels of the organization—from serving on the national board of governors and as executive directors of chapters to working on service lines in local field units. McKelvey helped develop a state nurse liaison program, now active in 42 states, to help local units use nurses' skills effectively.

“When you have a statement of understanding or a partnership that's built at the national level, it's only as good as it's implemented at the local level,” McKelvey said.

The student nurse initiative is another way she plans to strengthen nursing services. During the National Student Nurses' Association annual convention in April, more than 500 students and faculty participated in Red Cross disaster training.

McKelvey also is implementing a marketing strategy that promotes the Red Cross as an organization where nurses can volunteer in a meaningful way. To decrease barriers for involvement, the Red Cross has cut in half the amount of time it takes a nurse to become a first aid and CPR instructor, in recognition of the expertise that nurses bring to the position.

Establishing partnerships with other organizations is another way to achieve her goal, McKelvey said. The Red Cross is collaborating with many professional groups, including Nurses for a Healthier Tomorrow, America in Grief, the Office of Emergency Preparedness and the International Nursing Coalition for Mass Casualty Education. Web-based continuing education programs are being developed in partnership with other organizations.

Restoring relationships

Such partnerships between the Red Cross and other organizations have not always thrived. Lydia Marien, national chair of nursing for the Red Cross, noted that as a result of reorganization several years ago, nursing as a line of service was eliminated. Nursing was spread among all service lines, and in the eyes of leading professional nursing organizations, nursing's value and status were diminished. As a result, relationships between the Red Cross and many nursing groups faltered.

“Nancy has restored those relationships, so that now, we are actively collaborating with those professional groups,” Marien said.

An assistant professor at Research College of Nursing and a nurse practitioner in Kansas City, Mo., Marien is completing a three-year term in her present leadership position for the American Red Cross. A volunteer since 1966, she has worked with McKelvey for the past six years.

“She’s a very thoughtful leader,” Marien said. “She’s also very forthright in her opinions and in her statements, so there’s no double-guessing. She’s very astute at understanding the people in the system and the system itself.”

McKelvey’s leadership style is reserved yet assertive, Marien said, and she builds on the past to effectively choose future directions for Red Cross nursing.

“I think she’s a wonderful example of a professional nurse. She always extends a caring attitude to everyone she works with.”

Exploring nontraditional roles

McKelvey is often asked, “Do you ever do any nursing?” Although she considers her position to be a nursing role, she realizes that others may view nursing in a more traditional, clinical sense.

“If it is not a strictly hands-on health-related role, people don’t think of needing nurses to do it,” McKelvey said. One of her challenges has been helping Red Cross field units understand the value of engaging nurses in nontraditional roles. For example, nurses serving on a board of directors have much to offer because of their knowledge of the community and its resources.

“Nurses bring a public trust; they bring an ability to translate technical knowledge into lay language; and they bring their whole health background to the table,” McKelvey said.

Following the Sept. 11 attacks, McKelvey has received an increased number of inquiries from young people asking how they can become nurses. She urges nurses who are working in nontraditional roles to identify themselves as nurses to point out the wealth of opportunities available.

“I encourage nurses to be good role models and to talk about the positive aspects of nursing as well as the problems,” McKelvey said. “If it’s something that you like doing, it’s very exciting and challenging.”

Volunteering advice

The Red Cross has about 30,000 volunteer nurses, but more are needed. For nurses who want to offer their services to the Red Cross or another agency, McKelvey has these suggestions:

- Prepare yourself to respond. Before a disaster strikes, develop a personal or family disaster plan. Your local Red Cross chapter has pamphlets to guide you.
- Obtain disaster training so you’re prepared to help. You are more valuable to a response agency if you know its system.
- Learn more about your community health system and level of preparedness. What are your community’s vulnerabilities for natural or manmade disasters?
- Be prepared for your role in your agency’s disaster plan.
- Visit www.redcross.org/services/nursing to learn more about Red Cross nursing.

The need to be prepared at the local level was emphasized during the Sept. 11 attacks, she said. Because air traffic was temporarily shut down, it was difficult to mobilize volunteers from other areas. And, it is impossible to predict where disaster may strike next.

“Being prepared gives people a sense of control. After 9-11, people were at loose ends because they did not expect anything like this, and they didn’t know what to do,” McKelvey said. “I would like to encourage nurses to take advantage of the opportunity that’s been presented by these awful events of 9-11 and make something positive of it.”

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