



The Symbiotic Relationship of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and the National Guard Bureau

The U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Commissioned Corps is one of eight uniformed services protecting the United States – along with the U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Navy, U.S. Space Force, U.S. Coast Guard, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Commissioned Corps. The USPHS Commissioned Corps is the unique component of the federal government and the only uniformed service in the world dedicated to protecting our citizens' health both nationally and globally. As authorized by Congress, the all-officer cadre of the USPHS Commissioned Corps is commissioned by the President and deployed by the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS). USPHS Commissioned Corps personnel are uniformed officers who accept assignments to serve the vulnerable and underserved, domestically and abroad. These assignments are often isolated, hard to fill and hazardous positions which require availability 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and involve engagement with local communities and frequently with other uniformed services. These service members have been America's frontline responders to urgent public health emergencies such as Ebola, Anthrax, Natural disasters, Man-made disasters (e.g. September 11th) and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the USPHS Commissioned Corps' mission of "protecting, promoting and advancing the health and safety of our Nation," the majority of the USPHS Commissioned Corps' response efforts are focused domestically. For this reason, the USPHS Commissioned Corps has a formally codified relationship with the National Guard Bureau (NGB) whose dual mission is "to provide trained units to the States, Territories and the District of Columbia and keep itself equipped to protect life and property, while also providing trained units to the Nation so its equipped and ready to defend the United States and its interests all over the globe." While both NGB and the USPHS Commissioned Corps have an overseas presence, both Services are most known as trusted protectors of the Homeland, supporting communities in times of crisis (e.g. COVID-19, wildfires, civil disturbances and hurricanes).

In 2019, 4-stars General Joseph Lengyel and Admiral Brett Giroir signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) which laid the official framework for the ongoing partnership between NGB and the USPHS Commissioned Corps for the development, use, evaluation, and revision of training and technical assistance for mutual benefit intended to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of disaster preparedness and response capabilities, force readiness and inter-Service operability during a domestic emergency (including public health emergency) or disaster response. The MOU also provides a framework of support to state, local, tribal, and territorial operations to ensure members of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and NGB learn from each and are trained, equipped and otherwise prepared to fulfill their public health and emergency response roles.

National Guard (NG) members work at the State level under Title 32 and provide domestic response under the Governor. Many of the responses have a public health or medical component to them. With these responses, there are opportunities for the USPHS Commissioned Corps and state NG to share information, as well as, participate in training and exercises to increase awareness of each other's skillsets and increase their preparedness. This collaboration is critical when the incident is nationwide (i.e. COVID) and reduces the Governors' ability to leverage the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMACs). In 2021, the USPHS Commissioned Corps developed NG state memorandum of agreements (MOAs) to further expand the authorities to allow the NG and the USPHS Commissioned Corps to jointly respond when called upon by the states. Each state-specific MOA supported a USPHS

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Commissioned Corps Regional Liaison Officer (RLO) to be co-located with or near the National Guard Regional Medical Plans Officer (RMPO). The USPHS Commissioned Corps RLO served as a public health subject matter expert to the state-specific NG, at the request of the appropriate federal agency (such as Federal Emergency Management Agency) and in coordination with the appropriate state civil or military authority. To date, MOAs supporting joint training are established with the states of Colorado, Missouri, Maryland, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, with additional MOAs in the works.

The concept of joint response has been repeatedly tested and proven successful. The best example is when the USPHS Commissioned Corps provided support to NG's COVID-19 vaccination efforts. The USPHS Commissioned Corps augmented the NG's medical teams in States and locations providing medical and public health expertise often needed in community public health efforts. In January 2021, PHS officers were deployed to support Washington state's NG efforts to augment vaccination efforts and testing access where it is needed most, including communities at higher risk. The USPHS Commissioned Corps was poised to send more. Both entities agree enduring partnerships with NGB and NG States are paramount to support the Combatant Commands and impact national security. Through this NG-USPHS partnership, personnel learn together, work together, and prepare – if necessary – to combat disease for any future public health threat of scale impacting the homeland.

NG contains a large portion of the Army and Air Force medical capabilities. There are training and integration opportunities for PHS officers to train and understand operational medicine as well as provide public health awareness, knowledge and considerations to NG members as they prepare for both domestic as well as contingency operations. Unfortunately, due to needed technical fixes to fully implement the USPHS Commissioned Corps Ready Reserve Corps, the ability to grow the partnership and develop Reserve-specific joint training and response has come to a standstill. In the 2020 CARES Act, Congress authorized the USPHS Commissioned Corps to stand up a Ready Reserve Corps as an additional force for any future disease outbreaks and natural disasters. Regrettably, the CARES Act lacked the language needed to ensure parity of entitlements (i.e. TRICARE, military leave, Montgomery GI Bill/Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, etc.), thus the Ready Reserve Corps is not able to function similarly to the Armed Forces Reserve components as Congress intended. There have been multiple proposals submitted to remedy this omission and align the Ready Reserve Corps with the Selected Reserves of the other Armed Forces and boost the Nation's protectors of the Homeland ability to serve in times of need. In addition, specific appropriations are not allocated for the operations of the USPHS Ready Reserve, which was further complicated with the rescission of funds by Congress. This caused the RLO program to dissolve. Once these imparities and funding deficits are resolved, strategic coordination for future joint deployments of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and NG would augment both NG's State Active Duty and Title 32 missions and the USPHS Commissioned Corps' Title 42 missions. Furthermore, once properly resourced, the USPHS Commissioned Corps Ready Reserve Corps can be a means for the NG's state partnerships program to support humanitarian responses internationally.

President Joe Biden's National Security Memorandum-15 (NSM-15) and National Biodefense Strategy and Implementation Plan for Countering Biological Threats, Enhancing Pandemic Preparedness, and Achieving Global Health Security (the Strategy) highlights the need to protect our Nation from future pandemics and biological threats. The Strategy calls from a whole-of-government approach to detect, prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from biological incidents, in partnership with our international, state, local, tribal, territorial, and private sector partners. NSM-15 supports execution of the strategy by strengthening the coordination of biodefense efforts across government. Much of the Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear defense (CBRND) response under NORTHCOM belongs to the NG. Participating in their training and exercises will make the USPHS Commissioned Corps value added to a domestic response to any natural or manmade CBRND disaster response. The partnership of the NG and the USPHS Commissioned Corps is in alignment with this strategy.

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