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Volunteers with the Medical Reserve Corps practice a drill. Next week, Charlestown Police Department and local volunteers will receive training in case of emergency situations in the wake of the Boston bombings.

Local first responders train for emergencies

By **KERRY MILLER**
Assistant Editor

CHARLESTOWN — In the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing and the explosion at the Texas fertilizer plant, Charlestown Police and volunteers with the Newport-based Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) next week will practice a way to prepare for an emergency situation.

Charlestown Police Chief Edward Smith told the town's Board of Selectmen this week that police and the MRC will do a walk-through drill of a Point Of Dispensing center, or POD, on Tuesday, April 23 at the Charlestown Primary School. The walk-through is being done on that day because students are on vacation next week.

A POD center is a predetermined facility where medication is stockpiled and related

assistance is offered in case of an emergency. Members of the MRC are among the first responders to emergency situations and part of their emergency training is PODs. Charlestown Primary School and the Newport High School are secondary sites for a POD in Sullivan County, said Jessica Rosman, director of the Sullivan County Medical Reserve Corp., because those towns don't have a large enough population to be a primary location. In the case of an emergency, a primary POD would be set up at the Mount Sunapee Spruce Lodge and/or the Claremont Middle School.

"We have completed drills at both locations and some people may remember going to Claremont school POD site in 2010 to get their free H1N1 shot. We use the POD to give flu shots or in case of the worst possible thing

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to hit the population like anthrax, it's to give the whole population medication in 36 hours," explained Rosman.

Rosman added that in Charlestown, police and MRC will only be doing a walk-through POD drill and not setting up a full-scale training exercise because they don't have enough volunteers. When more volunteers are available, she said, they will do it again.

"We're just doing a walk-through, there's only three people going. We don't have enough volunteers for Charlestown, it would require 30 to 50 staff. We would run through 250 people per hour. You have to have medical stations, screening stations, greeters, people to deal with security, supply management; People to man doors, crowd control. MRC isn't just medicine," said Rosman.

A POD drill helps MRC members "time our ability to set up and take down. It's all about getting the population what they need quickly. We get the bugs out, we do it in an organized manner, use the chain of command like they would in any emergency," explained Rosman.

Among the many things MRC volunteers are trained in are CPR, first aid, disaster life support, chain of command system and psychological first aid. Following the Boston bombings, she continued, a chain of command was established for law enforcement and emergency medical responders to properly handle the situation. Setting up a chain of command and a POD is an important process.

"It's a really intensive planning process so we're ready to respond to anything," she said.

In light of the Boston bombings and the Texas fertilizer plant explosion, being prepared for an emergency situation is especially important for first responders like the MRC.

"Several times a year it's important to drill and practice and test our ability to do things like this. It's important to do in advance of something happening. We were just talking about it a meeting, it's incredibly crucial to be vigilant now. We

should be paying attention to people who help during an emergency. Several MRC volunteers were at that event [the Boston Marathon,] did an amazing job helping," said Rosman.

In an email to Rosman, an MRC official wrote about two people who kept their spirits up following the bombings:

"One MRC member/marathon finisher kept right on going to assist at a shelter in Brookline and another new unit coordinator present on her own time sprung into action a half mile from the finish line helping stopped runners get warm, hydrate, debrief and connect with family using her cell phone."

At the marathon, the MRC had 14 teams of volunteers, with two from New Hampshire and about 238 volunteers along the route.

The Sullivan County Health Network's branch of Medical Reserve Corps is based in Newport, but encompasses 15 surrounding communities including Charlestown. The Newport MRC was established in 2008 and currently has 32 volunteers in the unit. According to the MRC website, medical-reservecorps.gov, the Sullivan County MRC has helped in the past with preparedness efforts including setting up H1N1 vaccination clinics. The MRC is a national organization under the U.S. Surgeon General created to promote healthy living and prepare for and respond to emergencies. The organization was established in July 2002, after 9/11, to make sure trained volunteers could help in times of need.

Rosman said the MRC is always accepting volunteers and anyone interested can register at nhresponds.org. Volunteers of all backgrounds are needed including medical personnel, students, social workers, teachers, mental health counselors and more. For more information about the Sullivan County MRC visit sullivancountynh.gov/mrc.

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Kerry Miller can be reached at (603) 504-3100, ext. 101 or by email at kmiller@eagletimes.com.