

RESPONDER SPOTLIGHT

Lebanese Repatriation

By Anne Witter, Registered Nurse

ALERT

The first week of July 2006, Lebanon faced fighting, deaths, and prisoners captured. Civilians in Beirut experienced airstrikes and bombs.

The United States State Department received requests from 8,000 Americans living in Lebanon for safe passage back to the U.S. The Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) and Maryland Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) requested Governor Robert Ehrlich to open a repatriation center in Maryland.

Governor Ehrlich chose BWI airport and directed DHMH, MEMA, Homeland Security, and Maryland Responds (then called Maryland Professional Volunteer Corps) to assist the evacuees when they arrived in Maryland.

ACTIVATION NOTIFICATION

Maryland Responds sent out email alerts and phone calls requesting a deployment to BWI from July 18-22. The mission was to receive repatriated citizens of the U.S. fleeing the war zone. I responded with my availability to activate for all the days needed. Notification came back accepting me as a volunteer-- we never self deploy!

Bring your driver's license and Maryland Responds identification badge, they told us. Carry it on your person at all times. Bring a



sleeping bag, small medical go bag-- BP cuff, stethoscope, and thermometer. Don't forget paper, pens and pencils, as well as a small back pack for personal items.

DEPLOYMENT

They told us to arrive 0800 Tuesday, July 18, to the BWI international passenger parking lot. Show gate guard your Maryland Responds ID badge.

Check In

We were introduced to one another and our skillsets were shared. Many of us had worked together on previous deployments. The chain of command was outlined and policy and procedures were explained. A lawyer was present to answer any legal questions that may have arisen. We were also shown the emergency plan and emergency exits. Next, the plan of action was gone over and teams were set up.

MARYLAND RESPONDS MEDICAL RESERVE CORPS



MARYLAND RESPONDS STATE PROGRAM

Email: mdresponds.dhmh@maryland.gov

Web: mdr.dhmh.maryland.gov

Registry: mdresponds.dhmh.maryland.gov

Facebook: facebook.com/mdresponds

Outside there was an ambulance on standby while we staffed the international terminal. The inner lobby was our staging area. It contained multiple stations where various needs would be met and an information area with interpreters in the middle. The glass atrium was occupied by security and runners for those trying to help a family get to a connecting flight. Overhead on the skywalk, many armed guards were posted and many armed police on Segways were present on the ground level. Their presence was a comfort. We utilized an area the USO set up as a quiet room, and one isolation room, if needed, was available nearby.

Operations

We were told from the onset the only thing we could expect was the unexpected. Flights would change by the numbers of passengers and the arrival times. Many of the flights had to refuel in Europe, creating unknown delays.

Governor Robert Ehrlich visited the site before the first arrivals and commented "It's the way the country's supposed to work ... It's seamless".

Our first flight arrived at 0630, July 19, with a resounding explosion of joy-- this continued for all flights. The repatriates felt blessed. We welcomed all flights with such jubilation.

The first flight carried 160 passengers who endured going from a cruise ship to a war-zone to multiple plane delays in Europe. They were anxious, exhausted, and hungry.

Maryland did its due diligence processing the evacuees, with the State Department represented, Homeland Security, and customs. Then, the passengers were cleared medically. Assessments were done checking for illness that may have to be quarantined or injury from the evacuation.

The passengers were escorted to the staging area where their needs could be met: a private medical assessment for special needs or treatments, staffed by our nurses and a doctor. Present were emergency medical

service/fire personnel on standby for acute events, a pharmacist for any medication questions, and social workers for mental health issues. Proper care was available for the overly anxious passengers and children traveling alone.

A hot or cold meal was provided and staffed by Panera Bread Company. Computer banks to receive and send emails and make transportation arrangements were present and staffed by disaster services engineers. A bank for passengers to borrow money from the Maryland Comptroller's Office for tickets home was staffed by the Comptroller's Office. Phone banks for flight arrangements were available too.

The later flights came with more injuries and increased anxiousness. Most flights had 200-300 passengers but a Boeing 747 arrived at 0120 with 458 on board. They were processed without a hitch.

Maryland served 19 State Department flights carrying 4,492 repatriates arriving from Cyprus through BWI from July 19 to 22.

POST DEPLOYMENT

The Governor's Office surprised me with a Certificate of Appreciation for my five days of service.

I wish all Marylanders could have witnessed their state in action. This is how Maryland government offices and Responders run disaster services. The unsung heroes behind the scenes that effectively organize, protect, and serve the citizens of Maryland and the volunteers who step up to the plate when called into service.

It was not the first time Maryland reached out to Americans in other states and I doubt it will be the last. If you are blessed with the opportunity to serve as a volunteer for Maryland Responds you will find your heart receives far more than you can give.