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President’s Corner

LCDR Anne Purfield

Fellow Officers,

The 2016 Executive Committee for Atlanta Commissioned Officers Association (ACOA) is launching their tenure in support of the ACOA mission to offer opportunities to Atlanta based officers to give back locally to the community, enjoy camaraderie and esprit de corps.

Your elected Executive Committee includes:

◊ Immediate Past President: CDR Deborah Dee
◊ Vice President and President-Elect: LCDR Timothy Cunningham
◊ Secretary: LCDR Erika Odom
◊ Treasurer: CDR Sylvera Demas
◊ Communications Committee Co-Chairs: CDR Valarie Wilson and LCDR James Dixon
◊ Community Service Committee Co-Chairs: CDR Maleeka Glover and LCDR Jennifer C. Smith
◊ Events Planning Co-Chair: CDR Nicole Flowers and LT Rachel Cook
◊ Professional Development Committee Co-Chairs: LCDR Elizabeth Irvin-Barnwell and LT Tamara Henderson

For the Executive Committee, 2016 will seem jam-packed with Professional Development opportunities to network, engage in mentoring relationships, and learn more about Corps policies. Our Service committee will plan and organize exceptional opportunities for officers to work side-by-side and serve our community. The Communications committee will make sure you are aware of opportunities and maintain our visibility. ACOA will host two major events to celebrate the success and camaraderie of our officers during the 2016 Promotion Ceremony and the Anchor and Caduceus Dinner.

We’ll work hard to provide you with ample opportunities for you to get involved. Please consider getting more involved in ACOA this year and contact a member the Executive Committee to find out about how you can share your ideas and serve either as a committee member or a volunteer. This year, use ACOA as a mechanism to make new friends, network for career opportunities or learn how to progress your career in USPHS Commissioned Corps.

Respectfully,

LCDR Anne Purfield
The 2015 USPHS Scientific & Training Symposium was held during May 18–21, 2015 in Atlanta, GA. As the host branch, Atlanta Commissioned Officers Association (ACOA) was tasked with planning several Symposium activities, including the Surgeon General’s Run/Walk. CDR Loren Rodgers led the planning of the race, which was held early on May 20 at Piedmont Park. ACOA took charge of all planning activities, including establishing contracts with a professional race organizer and shuttle companies, designing and printing shirts, obtaining awards, designing and displaying banners, managing the annual physical fitness test (APFT), creating t-shirts, and distributing timing chips to log race times to score performance for the APFT and to qualify for additional races through the USA Track and Field Association. Altogether, over 50 officers and student volunteers from the Emory Physician Assistant Program worked together to make the event a success for the 188 runners that completed the challenging course. ACOA’s very own CDR Neil Gupta was the overall winner of the race with a 5K completion time of 19:56.04.

The Surgeon General’s Run/Walk has traditionally been held during the Scientific & Training Symposium. The 2015 race was the 20th consecutive year the race had been held in conjunction with the Symposium. It also commemorated the Symposium’s 50th year, a year that may be regarded among the Corps’ finest due to the unique clinical role the Corps served through the Ebola response. As a tribute to these responders, LCDR Melissa Collier designed this year’s t-shirt with a depiction of a responder running in personal protective equipment. In his address before the race, RADM Lushniak commented on the importance of our officers running in to respond to Ebola while others were running away.

Our own Surgeon General, VADM Vivek Murthy, provided opening remarks for the race, and commented on how we set an example for the country when we participate in fitness events, and when we invite others to join us. To further the Corps’ reputation as leaders in health and fitness, officers are encouraged to wear Esprit de Corps clothing and form officer teams in fitness events that are advertised and tracked though The Surgeon General’s Fitness Team; see publichealthserviceathletics.org for more information.
VADM Murthy (center) and RADM Lushniak (right) show off their Surgeon General’s Fitness Team shirts with RADM Giberson (left).

Right: CDR Gupta (right) receives his award from RADM Lushniak (left).

Above: Officers wearing the 2015 race shirt.

Above: RADM Scott Giberson (left) provides opening remarks.
USO Ribbon Cutting and Unveiling of the Newly-Renovated USO Center

CAPT Stardust W. Mazzariello

The USO located at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport celebrated the Ribbon Cutting of their newly-renovated facility on July 14, 2015. This USO is the world’s busiest and most efficient airport. It has spent 38 years assisting troops being deployed, new recruits on their way to basic training and military families transferring all over the world. It is a place where the troops and their love ones are treated warmly are welcomed, respected and appreciated.

Mayor Kasim Reed, Hartfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport officials, and USO dignitaries re-dedicated the newly-renovated USO Center. Mayor Kasim Reed of the City of Atlanta was the Special Guest speaker at the newly renovated USO facility to honor military service member and their family. A year ago the mayor vowed to create the facility for members of the U.S. Armed Forces that would emulate airline clubs located throughout the airport. The facility was upgraded to include a food and beverage hospitality suite a Skype-only dedicated computer for video conferencing, ample electrical outlets and beautiful modern furniture.

Present during the ribbon cutting ceremony was PHS officer, LCDR Tamara Henderson, LCDR Tomika Bivins, LT Rachel Cook and myself, CAPT Stardust Mazzariello. We took a tour of the renovate facility and I must say it is simply beautiful.

The USPHS officers volunteer on the third Saturday of every month at the Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson USO. On Saturdays the PHS Officer’s cover two shifts, the first shift is from 9:00 am to 12 noon and the second shift from 12 noon to 3:00 pm. We also have a Special Holiday Event in December that we host for the troops which we truly enjoy.

Mr. Kasim Reed, Mayor of Atlanta, with USPHS Officers and other individuals.
Ever since I learned that Space Available (Space A) existed, I wanted to try it. I am an avid traveler, but also a planner. In fact, during OBC somebody joked that I would never try it. Three years and 10 months later I set out on a journey which I set myself one metric of success: not having to buy a one-way ticket back from Europe at the last minute to avoid being AWOL. A secondary goal was sleeping in bed every night since I did not book all my hotels in advance. I know, doesn’t sound like a high bar, but I did not want to be disappointed. For my planned 2 week adventure, I submitted a leave request for 30 days of leave. Not wanting to subject anyone else to whatever disaster this may have ended up as, I set out alone.

After considering all the countries I wanted to visit and my odds of a successful trip, I settled on Italy as the target destination. There are 2 types of Space A flights. One is military aircraft operated by the military. These flights are announced 3 days in advance and tend to be rather erratic in frequency. The second type of flight is called Patriot Express (PE). PE flights are contract aircraft operated by contract crews. These flights tend to follow regular patterns and can be announced 30 days in advance. The closest base, Dobbins, did not have a promising schedule for getting me to Europe. Charleston is a rather easy drive from Atlanta and tends to have lots of flights, but those flights are all non-PE. After spending several months watching trends, I settled upon Baltimore Washington International Airport (BWI) as where I wanted to catch my first flight from. This is a civilian airport with a military terminal located in it. BWI regularly has PE flights to Europe. Southwest and Spirit Airlines both operate rather affordable flights to BWI. Trains, buses, and driving were all time consuming prospects. I decided to gamble and buy a roundtrip ticket on Southwest to BWI since tickets were reasonably priced ($195.50 on 9/12/15) and there is no change fee associated with their tickets.

Being overly cautious, I flew into BWI a day before (9/26/15) the BWI-Ramstein Space A flight I wanted to catch ($17.70). Baltimore has a great aquarium you can reach via train and the airport Red Roof Inn has a free airport shuttle. BWI, Ramstein, and Aviano Passenger Terminals all post their flights on Facebook. BWI originally posted 26 Tentative Space A seats on the 9/27 flight I wanted. On 9/27 when arrived prior to Roll Call to be marked Present (by presenting my CAC card and leave slip in person), the BWI Passenger Terminal did not have a copy of the signup I had submitted via email earlier that week when my leave started. Thankfully, I had a printed copy of the email, so BWI was able to honor my earlier signup date. While waiting in the terminal, BWI had a monitor that listed everyone marked present. When they turned on the monitor 64 people were marked present and the number of tentative seats had dropped to just 2! The first Roll Call was at 2130. As the evening wore on, BWI obtained a better idea of space available on the flight and did additional Roll Calls. Around the 3rd Roll Call at 2245 my name, 28th on the monitor, was called! By this point I had gotten rather nervous about where I was going to sleep that night in Baltimore. At around 2340 they made a final Roll Call when all the Category 3 travelers (through 41st name on the monitor for a total of 50 released seats) made it on the flight. While the flight included 2 meals, I strongly recommend packing snacks since you spend a good deal of time waiting in terminals when flying Space A. I arrived in Ramstein,
Germany on 9/28 as I had hoped. When I arrived in Ramstein on the B777, I was originally distressed to learn that the lodging on base was full. Thankfully, something on base opened up for me after about an hour of nail biting when I was working on a Plan B. In hind sight, I should have reserved lodging on base before I arrived since they have free cancelation.

On the morning of the 29th I took a taxi (which are allowed on base) to the nearest castle, Burg Nanstein. The bases in Ramstein and Aviano both have Community Bank ATMs operated by Bank of America that did not charge me fees when I used my Bank of America ATM card to obtain Euros. All three passenger terminals had Wi-Fi, as did both base hotels, which was essential for checking the Facebook pages of the passenger terminals. That afternoon my goal was to catch the PE flight to Aviano, Italy. When the flight originally posted on Facebook the flight had 200 firm seats. At the 1400 Roll Call there were 290 seats released and only 36 used. Boarding the Atlas Air B747-400 was scheduled for 1545 and actually happened at 1645, matching with the theme of the trip, Semper Gumby. The flight departed at 1735 and asking for a window seat located upfront was successful. I reserved a room at the Aviano base hotel in advance and they sent a bus to pick guests up from the passenger terminal. Again, the hotel was booked full and had to turn several away. The club is across the street from the hotel and closes at 2200 which makes it the best dinner option when you arrive late. When you disembark and pickup checked bags, just remember the price for this cheap flight isn’t money, its time. Aviano has tighter security which is reflected by the fact that uniforms are not allowed around town and taxis are not allowed on base. The base hotel can call you a shuttle for an 18€ ride to the Pordenone Train Station, which is cheaper than the local taxis (~23€). I also advise not taking photos on base since it’s difficult to discern where it is allowed; if you end up as a travel buddy you might get this story out of me.

Pordenone is a 7€ and an hour train ride away from Venice. After that, Florence is another 45€ and 2 hours beyond. Croatia and Slovenia are both around 2 hours from Aviano by car. All of this makes Aviano a fantastic point of entry.

A few more lessons learned: In addition to trying to pack under 30lbs, try not to check a bag. Takeoff is way after Roll Call, but you can’t really go anywhere after Roll Call. Book a room at the base in advance because they fill up. Check with the Aviano ITT office for trips to Croatia.

I returned to Aviano a day before the flight I wanted to catch (10/7 Aviano-Ramstein-BWI with a 0730 Roll Call) was scheduled to depart. When I arrived in Aviano, I learned that the flight had been delayed 36 hours. This delay meant moving my Southwest flight from the 10/8 to 10/9, which meant I paid the increase in the airfare ($110.60), but no change fee. Having an international driver’s license would be beneficial for unexpected down days like this so you could rent a car (41€ on base). I was lucky and hitched a ride around the region from two retired couples who were Space A travelers. The flight was an Atlas Air 767-300er with 181 firm seats which took off at 1945 on 10/8 ($35.20). I was manifested all the way through to BWI. We had a short layover in Ramstein, where we were allowed into the terminal, but no further. We departed Ramstein at 2300 on 10/8 and landed in BWI.
0140EST on 10/9 to discover the first 5 hotels I called were full.

Overall, my adventure was $52.90 for the Space A flights to and from Europe and $306.10 for the domestic flight I purchased. For two weeks of on and off-base hotels I spent an average of $66 per night. If you have the leave accrued and a fair amount of patience, then perhaps I will see you on my next Space A adventure!

Tara at Piazza San Marco, Venice, Italy (UNESCO World Heritage Site)

Tara at on the island of Murano, Venice, Italy
A collection of Commissioned Corps Officers and several civilian colleagues from the CDC tested their speed, agility, and sheer determination to complete a 5k race through a devastated metropolis filled with zombies wandering the area intent on catching runners by grabbing flags from their waists. Runners who successfully out-ran and out-maneuvering the zombie horde to the finish line with at least one flag were crowned a zombie survivor.

What made this 5k race unique was its setting: The course wound through the ruined buildings, demolished structures, and city streets littered with debris that make up the 75-acre cityscape of the Guardian Centers in Perry, Georgia (1.5 hours south of Atlanta). This training facility is designed to mimic all sorts of disasters, including a flooded neighborhood of houses, collapsed parking decks, an overturned subway car and numerous smashed up cars and vehicles that created obstacles and barriers for runners to navigate. In some areas smoked billowed out from buildings and military helicopters buzzed overhead giving participants a tour of the facility from the air and adding to the overall disaster scene.

The team was all smiles at the finish line and swapped comic stories of close encounters with zombies and conquering the various disaster zones. While the race itself served as a fun and active way to spend the Saturday, visiting the disaster training center served as a reminder of the role of the Commissioned Corps in responding to real-life emergencies. Bryan Heartsfield, who currently serves in a Emergency Management Specialist role at CDC, had visited the training complex previously and noted the use of the facility by federal partners in preparing responders to successfully operating in adverse environments to assist persons and communities in need.
On Wednesday, September 16, CDR Jim Bellah and LT Oliver Ou participated in the University of Georgia (UGA) Fall Career Fair. This event took place at the Classic Center in downtown Athens, GA and was a huge success: nearly 2,000 UGA Alumni and students attended the career fair; there were approximately 100 vendors. CDR Bellah and LT Ou spoke with approximately 25 students about the important work USPHS Commissioned Corps officers does to protect, promote, and advance the health and safety of the Nation. Students from various academic departments and programs at UGA that include Public Health, Veterinary Medicine, Environmental Health Science, Pharmacy, Statistics, and Bioinformatics, were very interested in the career opportunities with the USPHS Commissioned Corps.

The students were excited to learn that U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps officers serve in diverse assignments across the federal government. Students were motivated by the noble mission of the USPHS Commissioned Corps, and expressed their desire to wear the uniform one day and serve the underserved. The Commissioned Student Training and Externship Program was also a frequent topic of interest and inquiry by many of the students. CDR Bellah and LT Ou answered their questions to their satisfaction, and handed out informational materials.
ACOA Habitat for Humanity Build Day – January 10, 2015
	CDR Timothy Styles, LCDR Sylvera Demas, and LCDR Tara L. Houda

ACOA officers volunteered for two Atlanta Habitat for Humanity Home volunteer events. The first one took place on Saturday, January 10, 2015, with five Atlanta-based Officers and ACOA members and one family member braving the cold to help build a Atlanta Habitat for Humanity Home. Over 30 volunteers endured below freezing temperatures to help Habitat for Humanity and the future owner work on her home. This was the “day five” build day for this home which included officers working on exterior soffits and fascia, installation of kitchen cabinets and countertops, installation of baseboard, window sills, caulking and interior painting.

On Saturday, May 16, 2015, five Atlanta-based PHS officers and ACOA members participated in a build for Habitat for Humanity from 0800 until approximately 1600. Each house is built over seven consecutive Saturdays; the future homeowner and volunteers, including ACOA officers, participated in “Day 5” of the build. Under the supervision of a Habitat for Humanity house leader, volunteers caulked the interior, installed baseboard, painted trim, and installed the kitchen, soffit and fascia. Volunteers completed the day by cleaning the site, assembling the tools, and loading them in Habitat for Humanity’s truck and trailer. Habitat estimates that volunteers save $30,000-$45,000 on a build.

Each Habitat for Humanity home is built over a period of seven weeks with volunteers contributing a substantial portion of the labor force each Saturday of the build. Under the guidance of a knowledgeable Habitat for Humanity house leader, volunteers use their current skills and develop new ones to get the work done.

Winter weather warriors fighting the cold to help build a house. ACOA officers included (from left to right) LCDR Latoria Mullins, LCDR Jennifer Foltz, LCDR Tara Levine-Houda, LT Jonetta Johnson, and CDR Timothy Styles.
This build day was the first of the year for ACOA and marks the tenth consecutive year ACOA has sponsored an Atlanta Habitat event. Like every Habitat event, Officers had a very busy, but extremely rewarding day.

ACOA plans to continue sponsoring community service activities with Habitat for Humanity throughout the year. Stay tuned for details regarding the next Habitat event and an opportunity for more officers to get involved.

As always, ACOA volunteers were grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the construction of a beautiful home for a wonderful family. This was the second ACOA build event with Habitat for Humanity this year. Great job everyone! For more information about Atlanta Habitat for Humanity, visit their website at http://www.atlantahabitat.org/.  

L to R: LT Felicia Warren, LCDR Sylvera Demas, CDR Diane Morof, LCDR Miriam Shiferaw, and LCDR Tara Houda

Shiferaw, and LCDR Tara Houda

LCDR Demas, CDR Morof and LCDR Shiferaw installing soffit in front of the house

LT Warren painting a door inside the house
On Sunday, July 12, 2015, 14 USPHS officers and family members from the Atlanta Commissioned Officers Association (ACOA) prepared meals for Project Open Hand. Equipped with stylish hairnets and aprons, volunteers both packaged meals for delivery the next day and assisted Project Open Hand staff with packing utensils for large deliveries. In some cases, the meals prepared by Project Open Hand are the only meals that the clients will receive for the day.

All volunteers commented on how great it felt to help out the greater Atlanta community. As LCDR Smith stated, “As dedicated PHS officers, we’re always protecting and promoting the Nation’s health on a grand scale. By volunteering with Open Hand, we’re giving back to the communities we live and work in. Although it’s just spending a few hours spent packaging meals, volunteering with Open Hand feels like, as a group of PHS officers, we’re making a difference, locally, in some small way…and that’s an awesome feeling.”

Approximately 700 individuals volunteer at Project Open Hand each week to provide 4,500 meals daily to Atlanta-area residents with chronic and terminal illnesses. ACOA officers look forward to volunteering with Project Open Hand again. To learn more about Project Open Hand, please visit www.projectopenhand.org.
We’re in the Zone!

LT Ayana Anderson

On June 4, 2015 six officers and one civilian enthusiastically served the patients and families of Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta (CHOA) at Scottish Rite’s, The Zone. This is the eighth year the Atlanta Commissioned Officer’s Association (ACOA) has participated with The Zone (formerly known as Camp Children and later, the Fun Factory). The Zone is an interactive experience that allows the patients and families of Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta to take a break from their hospital rooms to develop arts and crafts, plays games or share meals with other patients. The officers assisted 25 children with decorating sun visors, door hangers, and dream catchers for approximately two hours. Two officers provided comments on their volunteer experience:

“Working with the children at Scottish Rite reminds me why I work in public health - it puts a face to the children I work to protect, and lets me get my hands glittery while doing so!” ~ LCDR Stephanie Griese

LCDR Erin Sauber-Schatz noted that “volunteering with ACOA in the Zone is one of my favorite volunteer opportunities. This time I helped several children who were struggling with injury or illnesses make dream catchers. Seeing them smile at the final result and knowing their dream catcher would help make their hospital room a little happier was a great experience”

A second Zone service event will be held in December 2014 for officers who would like to volunteer at CHOA. More information will be provided closer to the date, so stayed tune!

‘People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care’— Theodore Roosevelt

Left to Right LCDR Francisca Abanyie, LCDR Erin K. Sauber-Schatz, CDR Ali Danner, CDR Agam Rao, LT Ayana Anderson, LCDR Stephanie Griese, Samuel Bimbo (officer’s friend)
ACOA members have been part of the growing community of Trees Atlanta volunteers since 2010. On November 1, 2014, a cold and windy Saturday, a group of nine ACOA members and two of their family members joined a group of more than 100 volunteers to help plant trees and make Atlanta a greener city. The tree planting event on November 1st was at Brook Run Park in the city of Dunwoody. Brook Run Park is one of Dunwoody’s premier parks located off Peeler Road and North Peachtree Road. The park is comprised of over 100 acres featuring a playground, dog-park, skate-park, community garden, trails, and multi-use fields. The volunteer group planted 216 native trees along Brook Run Park’s new walking/biking trail. Some of the species included White Oak, American Beech, Pignut Hickory, Eastern Hophornbeam, American Hornbeam, Serviceberry, Redbud, Red Maple, Southern Sugar Maple, Dogwood, Northern Red Oak, American Elm, Nuttall Oak, and American Linden. Representatives from Brook Run Park expressed their appreciation to the volunteers for their efforts and provided lunch for the volunteers. Trees Atlanta also thanked ACOA for bringing out such a great group of volunteers who braved the cold to plant trees and expressed their desire to work with us again in the future.

On May 16, 2015, a group of seven ACOA members and four of their kids joined a second Trees Atlanta event and spent the morning alongside a large crew of local volunteers mulching trees in and around Selena S. Butler Park in the Old Fourth Ward. These two activities were organized by Trees Atlanta, which is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to protecting Atlanta’s urban forest through planting, conservation, and education.

Trees Atlanta was founded in 1985 and the organization has planted more than 100,000 trees since then. Trees Atlanta relies heavily upon volunteers to help plant and care for trees (scheduled every Saturday) around the Atlanta metropolitan area. Over the years, more than 4,500 people have given their time, energy, and knowledge to help restore, maintain, and educate others about the importance of Atlanta’s urban forest. Trees Atlanta relied heavily upon the efforts of volunteers. Trees Atlanta thanked ACOA for bringing such an enthusiastic group of volunteers and expressed a desire to collaborate again in the future.

For more information about Trees Atlanta, please visit: [http://treesatlanta.org/](http://treesatlanta.org/).
CRD Rao and LCDR Rittenhouse Cope

LCDR Demas massaging a tree root

LCDR Llata & Cook pulling tree from its container

LCDR Dixon watering a tree

LCDR Llata & Cook massaging root tree

LT Ferguson shoveling dirt
For many years, dedicated officers from the Atlanta COA branch volunteer their time on Saturday mornings by serving food to the downtown Atlanta homeless community. On February 28 and August 8, 2015, dozens of officers and their family members continued in this tradition of service by preparing and serving food for the St. Francis Table.

History

St. Francis Table began operation on Holy Saturday, April 10, 1982 during the period when Franciscans Friars staffed the Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Atlanta. The name, St. Francis Table originated with the Franciscans who live their lives in imitation of St. Francis of Assisi.

St. Francis Table was started in response to the fact that there was a need for food for the hungry on Saturday. While various churches offered food during the week, there was no food program running on Saturday.

Today

Currently, St. Francis Table feeds 300 to over 500 people every Saturday morning in downtown Atlanta. Volunteers prepare sandwiches and/or prepare soup from ingredients that are either donated or are, primarily, purchased from the Atlanta Community Food Bank (AFCB). No fish or shellfish is used. Coffee is put on to brew, cold drinks are prepared and the cups, bowls, spoons and napkins are assembled and set out by the volunteers. The only requirement for the people to be fed, is that they are hungry. In addition to ACOA officers, there are several organizations including parishes, religious denominations, colleges, high schools and companies that participate in preparing the food.

The guests are invited in at 10AM and they each receive a meat and cheese sandwich, bowl, cup, spoon and napkin. After they are seated, the volunteers serve the soup from large pitchers. Each person is fed until they have their fill and they leave with to-go goodies such as desserts, bread, fruit, and/or drinks.
On behalf of ACOA, nine officers from CDC, CMS, and FDA (along with their guests) volunteered at St. Francis Table on Saturday, November 15, 2014. These volunteers joined together with other local volunteers, and St. Francis Table staff to serve lunch to over 500 members of the homeless community in downtown Atlanta.

St. Francis Table is a soup kitchen located at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Atlanta’s first Catholic Church. This is a non-profit organization that receives donations from the Atlanta Community Food Bank, local businesses, and community members. St. Francis Table typically serves between 350 and 550 meals every Saturday, provides donated clothing and personal items when possible, and rotates with other churches in the area to host a night shelter.

ACOA donated $50 towards packages of sliced meats and cheeses for sandwiches to be distributed as the guests departed after lunch. Additionally, some officers also generously contributed their own money and food supplies to support this event.

ACOA volunteers began bright and early at 0700 to prep, setup and clean tables, serve soup, bread, and beverages, seat guests, pack food, and assist with cleanup until just before noon. The officers’ work did not go unnoticed, as a member of St. Francis Table staff said “It was such a great gift to us to have you join us in the chaos of this past Saturday. As I understand it the number of guests served was approximately 500. Thank you for being a regular supporter.”

For more information on St. Francis Table please refer to: http://www.catholicshrineatlanta.org/phpMap/francis.php.

Pictured Left to Right: LT Kristin LaBar, CDR Robert Garcia, LCDR Ray Tookes, LCDR Esra Toussaint, LCDR Brek Steele, CAPT Kathy Slawson, LCDR Tara Foley, LCDR Johanna Gilstrap, LT Nicole Bell
All agreed it was a festive occasion at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta (CHOA) Scottish Rite on December 4, 2014. The hospital was decorated with garland, Christmas trees, fake snow, and inflatables to cheer the spirits of the young patients inside. Eleven ACOA officers participated in The Zone event (formerly known as Camp Children’s and the Fun Factory). During the 2.5 hour time frame, there were more than 20 patients (aged 2 to 16 years) and family members that stopped by to join in the winter holiday-themed arts and crafts session.

In light of the holiday season, an assortment of cheerful ornament and craft projects were available for patients to create and hang in their rooms or on medical equipment (e.g., wheelchairs, IV poles). One patient’s younger sister said, “I want to make something for my sister that will bring a smile to her face.” She decorated a pillowcase with her sister’s name and holiday drawings of snowflakes and trees.

Lisa, a 16-year-old patient, stated that all she wanted for the holiday season was, “Peace and to be in good health.” Speaking to the families and interacting with the patients evoked feelings of compassion and sympathy among ACOA volunteers, as well as thankfulness for the health of their own loved ones.

Stay tuned in 2015 when we will bring more cheer to patients and families at CHOA Scottish Rite!
ACOA Helps out at the Atlanta Kids Triathlon

LCDR Tara Foley

A collection of Commissioned Corps Officers and several civilian colleagues from the CDC tested their speed, agility, and sheer determination to complete a 5k race through a devastated metropolis filled with zombies wandering the area intent on catching runners by grabbing flags from their waists. Runners who successfully out-ran and out-maneuvering the zombie horde to the finish line with at least one flag were crowned a zombie survivor.

On behalf of the Atlanta Commissioned Officers Association (ACOA), 17 Officers and five guests volunteered at Atlanta Kids Triathlon on Sunday, August 23, 2015. This was the second year, ACOA participated. Volunteers representing three different agencies (CDC, CMS and FDA) worked together alongside other local volunteers to assist hundreds of young athletes compete in this fun-filled event.

The Atlanta Kids Triathlon is held annually in Atlanta and is open to kids ages 6-15. It was originally started as a fun and healthy event for kids and has grown to be one of the five largest in the United States. Triathlon is one of the fastest-growing sports in the world, and this event introduces kids to a healthy, positive lifestyle that encourages daily exercise, good nutrition and making the right choices. There were over 1,000 participants this year.

ACOA volunteers started out their day, some as early as 5:30 A.M., marking participants for the race and handing out packets. Afterwards they were sent to various stations such as the main tent where participants began their race or transition locations between swim and bike or bike and run. The day started out great, but as the juniors were midway through completion of their event, the skies opened up and the rain began to fall. Things got a difficult with the rain and the triathlon was ultimately called at 1000 am. As it were, the rain stopped soon after the race was called but many of the ACOA volunteers remained to help with tear down and the coordinators were lucky to have them. Our volunteers were also able to offer some valuable insight which I was able to relay to the volunteer coordinator and she assured me, it would be shared with the other event coordinators. This was a great event despite the weather and no worries, those who were not able to compete, will have another opportunity on October 11th. Looking forward to next year.
How to Avoid Common Leadership Traps

CAPT John Iskander

Commissioned Corps officers in the US Public Health Service perform in a variety of different leadership roles, some temporary and some permanent. Officers may be asked to serve as leaders in deployment or clinical settings, lead teams or projects, or direct large organizations or initiatives within the federal government. Leadership is both an opportunity and a privilege, but carries with it inherent challenges and risks. Thankfully, help is available. Through both extensive “leadership literature” and historical case studies, there exists a body of knowledge about some of the pitfalls of leadership, and ways they can be avoided.

Groupthink

One of the most famous and well-studied leadership traps is termed “groupthink.” There is often pressure on leaders and subordinates to follow prevailing views. Team members may be unwilling or unable to argue against or oppose a course of action that it appears the group (work team, clinic, etc.) has already decided on. Both groups that operate by consensus decision making and those that have more formal ways of making decisions (e.g. voting) can be prone to groupthink. People may not want to speak out as the lone dissenter, or have their lone vote opposing a particular course of action put “on the record.” Agreeing with the group is often described as “going along to get along”, but it can have tragic consequences. There is now broad agreement that the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster of 1986 largely resulted from organizational “groupthink” within NASA, in which time and mission pressures overwhelmed safety concerns of scientists and engineers about launching the shuttle under unexpectedly cold conditions.

For a counter example, recall the story of Emperor’s New Clothes. In this story written by Hans Christian Anderson, an Emperor is fraudulently sold a supposedly “invisible” new set of clothes. Only a small child was willing to speak the truth and declare that “the Emperor has no clothes.” So how can “groupthink” and the poor decision-making it can lead to be avoided? Ways to avoid groupthink include encouraging open dialogue around difficult or controversial issues, ensuring that contrarian views are raised and discussed, critically analyzing what seem to be the best or most popular decision options, and going beyond traditional circles to seek decision-making input. Leaders should encourage open discussion of operational alternatives and explicitly give their staff or team members “permission to speak freely.” If no one in the group has an opposing opinion, the group may not be big enough or diverse enough. Assure that opposing viewpoints are readily available. Seek consultation from non-traditional response partners, such as ethicists.

How do we translate this guidance into practical advice we can use as leaders? Don’t just ask if everyone agrees. Listen for phrases like “devil’s advocate” which may indicate underlying concerns people may be seeking to minimize, so as not to be seen as dissenting from the group. Seek private consultations if you know or suspect someone on the team has an opposing view or relevant information they are hesitant to share with the group. Task team members deliberately with making the case for alternate decisions or action strategies, even if they do not personally hold that view. Examine and question data and information that supports a particular course of action not simply to try and tear it down, but to ensure rigor of analysis and decision-making.

Going to the Basement

Public health crises, including outbreaks, natural disasters, and terrorist incidents, typically require rapid decision making. Decision making in crisis situations is prone to another leadership trap, which has been termed by the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative as “going to the basement.” This leadership trap has a basis in neurobiology. As leaders, we go with our “gut instincts,” relying on older parts of our brain such as the amygdala that are involved in “freeze, fight or flight” responses, rather than using our frontal cortex which is involved with higher thought processes.

“Going to the basement” refers to decision making that is rushed, seemingly driven by emotion, and which may not take all of the available facts into account. Neuroscience also offers a possible solution, with the finding that talking out problems and decisions serves to activate the frontal cortex, which can lead to more reasoned decisions. Many common sayings capture the wisdom of not acting too rapidly or rashly at a time of crisis: “Don’t just do something, stand there.” “The first thing you should do in a code is take your own pulse.”

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Leaders can stay “out of the basement” by maintaining constant situational awareness as new information about an emergency becomes available, talking openly about decision options, and deliberately considering a broad range of possible actions. We also need to draw on our training, connectivity, and self-awareness. Drills, exercises, table tops and other types of training offer good opportunities to simulate and practice making difficult decisions under emergency conditions. Fellow officers or other colleagues may be facing similar types of decisions in different organizations or field settings and so consulting with them is another way to “talk it out” and keep your cortex engaged. Mindfulness is another tactic to guard against rushed decision-making; this means simply being aware that you or other leaders are at risk of “going to the basement” and watching for this type of behavior in yourself and others.

The response to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings provide a positive example of leaders recognizing they were in danger of reacting too rashly and taking steps to lead the response more rationally. Police, fire, emergency management, and governmental leaders reported quickly making the mental transition from a profound sense of shock to a “quick burst of resilience.” This confidence was based on experience gained from drills and exercises which included bomb-related scenarios, as well as trust in the ability of colleagues and the systems they led to work together.

Decision-free leadership

Leadership is characterized by the need to make decisions. These can be wide-ranging, but may involve personnel, budget, or allocation of resources during a deployment. Decision-making by itself is not a leadership trap, but the decision-making process can go wrong in a number of ways. Sometimes it may appear that there are only a limited number of decision options, but historical examples such as the Cuban Missile Crisis suggest that widening the decision space to consider more options can be advantageous. President John F. Kennedy and his advisors considered at least six separate responses to the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba before proceeding with a naval blockade that began the resolution of the crisis. Deliberately task yourself and other team members with researching additional decision options.

An important question to ask is whether the right people have been consulted about a decision. This is not the same as making sure that everyone has been consulted about a decision, which often serves simply to delay the process. Effective leaders recognize that failing to make a decision, or not making one in a timely manner, is in itself a form of decision making. Such “non-decision decisions” have real-world consequences. For example, if deadlines are missed, resources to support programs or emergency responses may no longer be available. “Decision-free leadership” is, as we would say today, “not a thing”.

The current Basic Officer Training Course prominently features a quote from Vince Lombardi about how leaders are made, not born. Building leadership skills takes conscious effort and continuous practice. Being aware of common ways in which the leadership process can break down. Knowing how to guard against these stumbling blocks can help all Commissioned Corps officers to become better leaders under a variety of circumstances.

References