



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT PUBLIC HEALTH MUTUAL AID

### **Why mutual aid for public health?**

Public health involves first responder responsibilities, much like police and fire departments. The mutual aid agreement makes it possible for public health to enjoy similar support from communities for events that overwhelm local capacity. Communities agree to consider requests under the mutual aid agreement, and provide assistance to their colleagues when able.

### **Why must this agreement be approved by town meeting, or city council?**

The mutual aid agreement is an intermunicipal agreement, authorized by MGL c.40, § 4A. This statute requires that intermunicipal agreements must be approved in a city by the city council with the approval of the mayor, and in a town by town meeting.

### **I heard that there is legislation pending that would create mutual aid. Why not wait for that legislation?**

The pending legislation creates a mutual aid agreement for a declared state of emergency or major disaster. This public health mutual aid agreement is designed to permit communities to request support from each other for events that overwhelm local capacity, but may not rise to the level of a state of emergency. This packet includes several potential scenarios.

### **Is there any membership cost associated with participation in the region?**

No. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health created public health emergency preparedness regions to facilitate collaborative problem solving among communities.

### **How will someone from another town know what to do in our community?**

Staff from other communities will operate under the direction of staff of the receiving community. The agreement asks that requesting communities be specific about the scope of work they will require from sending communities.

### **How does this work for employment and liability issues?**

Any person responding to a mutual aid request remains an employee of his or her own (sending) community even while working in another community. Each agency, sending or receiving, is responsible for its own employees' wages, benefits, and similar obligations. The agreement also stipulates that each employer is responsible for the acts of their own employees. This is consistent with fire and police mutual aid agreements.



**Do we have to send our staff?**

No, the agreement specifies that the provision of aid is voluntary. Communities are asked to consider the request, and send assistance as they are able.

The agreement requires that requesting agencies be as specific as possible about the type of support they need and the length of time it is needed. This information will aid other communities in determining their response.

**What about reimbursement?**

There are no provisions for automatic reimbursement for the provision of mutual aid. Communities may negotiate arrangements individually.

This agreement conforms to FEMA policy regarding mutual aid. FEMA requires that any mutual aid agreement must be in writing, must be in effect before the event, and it cannot be contingent on a Presidential disaster declaration.

**Why do we have to have an agreement with communities far away from us?**

The mutual aid agreement is being implemented in the MDPH Emergency Preparedness Regional coalitions. These communities have been collaborating regarding emergency preparedness issues for a number of years. Additionally, it is potentially beneficial to have an agreement in place with communities beyond your immediate neighbors. Public health issues do not recognize town borders, and your immediate neighbors may be dealing with a similar issue, while communities farther afield are unaffected.

**Why isn't our immediate neighbor part of this region? Can we have an agreement with them?**

MDPH Emergency Preparedness Regional coalitions do sometimes separate natural partners. If there are additional communities outside of your region that you wish to have a mutual aid agreement with, you may enter into the same or a similar agreement with them.

**Our health department is great. Why would we need to sign up for help from other communities?**

Everyone is likely to need help at one time or another. That is why communities have mutual aid for fire and police



**We think we have another way of doing mutual aid. Why can't we change the agreement, or create our own?**

Mutual aid is not mutual if agreements differ between communities. The intent of asking communities to accept the agreement is to preserve mutual aid, not to dictate policy.

Communities are afforded flexibility in how they implement the agreement.

First, your community determines who the authorized representatives are who will receive requests for assistance and decide on them. Some communities may choose to use their Board of Health, together with the Health Director. Some communities may choose to include a member of town administration.

Second, there is no requirement to provide assistance. Communities are not expected to deplete their own resources to provide aid. Communities agree to consider requests under the mutual aid agreement, and provide assistance to their colleagues when able.