

## The CDC That Never Sleeps

When Bob Briley retired as a firefighter and paramedic in West Palm Beach, FL to work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), he was accustomed to a 24/7 schedule with a certain level of unpredictability. He also knew that his poised under pressure temperament was an asset to his success. When he brought that skill set to CDC in 2009 as a Deployment Briefing Coordinator during H1N1, he may have solidified his path as one who works in the places that never sleep.

After a few years preparing CDC staff to safely and securely deploy overseas, Bob began a new role as a Watch Team Duty Officer, one of three teams in the Division of Emergency Operations that he describes as “the tip of the spear for CDC.” He fielded calls from clinicians, scientists, and others seeking to connect with CDC experts on a myriad of issues and concerns. “Any information that is being requested, from the general public or the White House, we triage and send out to the appropriate teams for action,” Bob explains.

In this position, he was often the first point of contact for people around the world looking to determine if a situation needs national public health expertise involvement. Working with a vast array of news and weather media sources (often with live television being the best source of intelligence), the Watch Team Duty Officer fields information and uses an extensive list of protocols to take action. As these protocols are deployed, CDC uses criteria to determine if the incident qualifies for Emergency Operation Center (EOC) activation.

The process for EOC activation is very familiar to Bob. CDC has three emergency response activation levels with level one as the highest, reserved for critical emergencies. Considered an “agency-wide” response, this is when CDC assigns the largest number of staff to work 24/7. Prior to activation of the COVID-19 response, CDC level one activations included the Ebola outbreak in 2014, the H1N1 influenza outbreak in 2009, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Bob stayed in his division while moving into his current role as an Emergency Management Specialist with the Response Operations Team, where he was front and center at the start of the COVID-19 response. His job is focused on the logistics of the emergency operation including details for all types of meetings, communications, locations, and anything necessary for timely and accurate flow of information. Although COVID-19 has been the main focus for months, the subject matter is broad since he also has to keep an eye on natural disasters, man-made disasters, and be aware of any type of civil unrest in other countries. “From earthquakes in La Palma, Spain, to volcanoes in Alaska that interfere with Pacific Ocean flight patterns, we are watching it all,” Bob says.

Bob remembers fielding calls toward the end of 2019 and the subsequent response activation in January 2020. He recalls wondering how serious this would be and looking at ports of entry and other safety measures. Soon, some were sent home to work, distancing measures were in place, and staggered in-center schedules started, while the workload increased substantially. The Division of Emergency Operations is one of three branches of the CDC that never closes. In Bob’s words: “There is no typical day. Our branch is unique; we stay immersed all the time.” Working closely with the Health and Human Services Secretary’s Operation Center in Washington, DC, the two centers are responsible for health and safety throughout the United States and across the globe.

Bob has worked on dozens of activations. He recalls a period when there were multiple activations at one time requiring a satellite office to be installed as an additional operations center. He understands and appreciates the nature of this work and the demands it places on him.

Originally from Nashville, TN, Bob speaks fondly of riding through his home state and through the mountains of northern Georgia and North Carolina on his motorcycle. “That was my way to take time for Bob and decompress. My helmet was equipped with a Bluetooth feature that brought a variety of music into the experience,” Bob recalls. He no longer rides the motorcycle but is recently married to the woman he says he, “amazingly met, dated, and married during COVID-19.” He appreciates the quiet comforts of home and relaxing by the fire pit with the woman who refers to him as “LG”- Logistics Guy.

Bob views his career across a wide collection of experiences and rewards. On the CDC side, he finds the greatest satisfaction comes from seeing an activation reach its close. “When Ebola finally deactivated both from the EOC and from the Center level in March 2016, and no more cases were being reported, that was a wonderful feeling of success. If he thinks back to his paramedic days, he speaks of the ultimate payoff – delivering a baby. “When you catch that baby and it starts to cry, there is nothing that can replace that.”

Bob has delivered 28 babies.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/responder-stories/CDC-that-never-sleeps.html>