

Operation Pathfinder 2026 Brings Disaster Response Practice to the Oregon Coast |

*Alex Dolle**

NEWPORT, Ore. - In the Operation Pathfinder 2026 exercise scenario, the Oregon Coast was 48 hours into a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake and tsunami. Roads and bridges were compromised, communications were strained, and Samaritan Pacific Communities Hospital was

facing a surge of patients who needed triage, treatment, tracking and possible evacuation.

For two days in May, SERV-OR volunteers, including members of the Lincoln County Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), joined the Oregon Disaster Medical Team alongside hospital, state, county, military and communications partners to test how Oregon's medical response system might work under those conditions.

Held May 15 and 16 at the Samaritan Center for Health Education across from the Samaritan Pacific Communities Hospital, the Pathfinder exercise focused on how a joint medical response could support hospital decompression, patient assessment, resource requests, communications and evacuation during a large-scale coastal disaster.



Back row: Larry Wooten, Mathieu Creighton-Caraway, Gary Arfstrom, Frances Munkenbeck, Rachelle Lambert, Mark Scott, Elizabeth Burch, Larry Wiedenhoft, Abby Morris, David Clark, Stuart C Vaughters

Front row: Alex Dolle, Camden Hoover, Christopher Kruebbe, Robyn Greenlund, Shana Anderson, Judy Richardson, Michelle Morales-Hamilton

Not pictured: Caitlin Baxter Hopkins, Brenda Grall, Courtney Yan

The first day centered on shared learning. Participants checked in and attended presentations on the exercise scenario, Lincoln County emergency management operations, military medical capabilities, the Oregon Medical Coordination Center, orthopedic and crush injuries, pharmacy considerations during disasters and responder safety. The briefings helped show how each partner fits into a larger medical response system before teams moved into the hands-on portion of the event.

Many participants stayed overnight at Camp Gray, an OMSI facility in South Beach, before returning early Saturday for the main exercise. After breakfast and a morning briefing, volunteers were assigned to Medical Rapid Response Teams and began working through simulated patient encounters.

Patient actors, including nursing students from Oregon Coast Community College and staff volunteers from Samaritan Pacific Communities Hospital, moved through the exercise with moulage by Cascadia Moulage and triage cards. Teams applied Ten Second Triage, reassessed patients and routed them to red, yellow or green treatment areas based on acuity. Separate teams supported transport, logistics, communications, hospital coordination and resource requests.

Across the treatment areas, SERV-OR volunteers worked alongside ODMT members, physicians, nurses, EMTs, mental health specialists and other responders. Teams assessed patients, controlled bleeding, splinted injuries, provided mental health support, tracked patient movement and escalated patients whose conditions required a higher level of care.

For Shana Anderson, an EMT and SERV-OR volunteer assigned to the Red critical triage area, the value of the exercise was its realism. "The opportunity to practice 'hard truth' skills - making triage decisions under pressure when time, supplies, and resources are limited - was invaluable," she wrote. "These are the kinds of decisions we hope never to face, but practicing them in a controlled environment builds the muscle memory and mental resilience needed when it matters most."

The exercise emphasized austere medical care and resourcefulness. Participants used limited supplies, including improvised splints and wound dressings, while working through the realities of disaster medicine: moving quickly, reassessing constantly and making decisions aimed at doing the most good for the most people with the resources available.

Patient tracking was a major part of the work. Volunteers had to maintain accountability for patients, document care and ensure that each discharge or escalation was reviewed by an appropriate provider. The process reinforced that, in a disaster, knowing where patients are and where they need to go can be just as important as treatment itself.

Pathfinder also highlighted the importance of coordination across agencies. Responders had to think beyond individual patient care and consider how hospital operations, emergency management, communications, transport and regional bed placement all connect during a mass-casualty incident.

Mathieu Creighton-Caraway, a nurse, paramedic, and SERV-OR volunteer who has participated in multiple Pathfinder exercises, said the event stood out for "the remarkable level of organization employed in executing a multi-organization/discipline operation of such scale." He also emphasized flexibility as a core disaster-response skill, writing that rapidly changing circumstances make adaptability crucial to maintaining momentum.

That same theme appeared in Shana's reflection on teamwork. "The most powerful moment wasn't the medical precision," she wrote. "It was seeing people from entirely different walks of life realize they were equally vital to the outcome."

For SERV-OR volunteers, Pathfinder offered a hands-on opportunity to build disaster response skills in a no-fault learning environment. It also showed how volunteers can support Oregon's broader health emergency response system when local resources are strained.

Mathieu encourages others in the medical field to volunteer for exercises like Pathfinder because preparation cannot wait until a disaster is already underway. "Our most effective defense during a disaster is being adequately prepared well in advance," he says.

Exercises like Pathfinder matter because large-scale disasters require relationships before the response. The time to learn how teams communicate, how patients move, how resources are requested and how decisions are made is before a real emergency. In Newport, participants tested those systems, identified operational friction points and strengthened partnerships for a day when such medical response is no longer an exercise.

Reporter Eli Kuhn, from KEZI 9 News, reported from the training exercise. His report, [linked here](#), was a top story featured on Saturday's evening news.

Pathfinder is an annual exercise sponsored by the Oregon Health Authority Health Security, Preparedness and Response program. To learn more about Pathfinder, see these videos:

- [OHA Pathfinder 2017 Highlights](#)
- [Coffee with Kiera Guests with State and Local Emergency Response Officials](#)

Learn how you can get involved as a volunteer with [SERV-OR](#).

* Alex Dolle is a SERV-OR Volunteer and a member of the Bulletin Development Team.