

Answering the Call

By day, Ryan Ward works in Ottawa as a trade commissioner, helping promote links between DFAIT Headquarters, regional offices and missions overseas. But when an emergency happens somewhere in the world, you'll find him after hours in the Emergency Watch and Response Centre, helping Canadians.

Ward is one of some 350 DFAIT staff members who make up the Emergency Response Community. This group—traditionally referred to as “volunteers,” though they're paid for their work—includes employees from all streams and classifications who, Ward says, “give their evenings, weekends and early mornings to make sure that Canadians in distress have somebody on the other end of the phone to talk to.”

Ward came to the centre on his first day at DFAIT in July 2006, answering a call to help with the evacuation of Canadians from Lebanon that summer. Since then, he has always looked for opportunities to go back to the centre. Indeed, after returning from a two-year posting in Indonesia late last year, he says there have been plenty of such opportunities. This year alone,



Ryan Ward and colleague Johanna Fall in the Emergency Watch and Response Centre

Helping by numbers:
From February to April, volunteers worked almost 11,000 hours in the EWRC on eight different emergencies, receiving 35,000 calls and making a similar number.



between early February and the end of April, he assisted with emergencies in Egypt, Libya, New Zealand, Japan, Bahrain, Yemen, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso.

Julie Lambert, Deputy Director of the Rapid Response Network unit, says that a new system on the Human Resources portal helps with recruiting, registering, training and keeping track of volunteers such as Ward. Potential and existing members of the community can take orientation and refresher courses offered by the Canadian Foreign Service Institute (CFSI), as well as identify and update their skills and indicate their preferences, which can range from work in the call centre to rapid deployment.

Lambert adds that many staff join the community because they like being where they can have a direct impact when emergencies hit. “It’s an opportunity to be part of the news, to do what you can to improve the situation,” she says.

Ward, who has started working shifts as a junior operations officer, acts as a “pit boss,” supporting other volunteers and communicating with operations officers, in more complex cases. Each call is different, he says, involving a wide range of issues and challenges. He recommends that those who haven’t worked in the centre give it a try.

“It’s a great experience to help people on the front lines,” he says. “It’s fantastically rewarding to get that call where somebody says, ‘I’ve just arrived back in Toronto from Egypt, you guys got me out, thank you so much, I couldn’t have done it without you.’”

Interested in joining the Emergency Response Community? Register for the online orientation, ODS060, offered on the CFSI website, and follow the instructions.