



American Red Cross

Blood Services
Great Lakes Region



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This is the most famous and widely circulated photograph of Clara Barton. It was taken circa 1865 by photographer Mathew Brady in Washington, D.C.

Red Cross History: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

A Brief History of the American Red Cross

In 1881, Clara Barton and associates established the American Red Cross; and in 2006 the national nonprofit organization celebrated the 125th anniversary of its founding. In the early 1900s, it received a Congressional Charter, which set forth the purposes of the organization.

Prior to the First World War, the Red Cross introduced its first aid, water safety and public health nursing programs. With the outbreak of war, the organization experienced phenomenal growth. The public contributed funds and material to support Red Cross programs, including those for American and Allied forces and civilian refugees. The Red Cross staffed hospitals and ambulance companies to serve the military as well as help combat the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918.

After the war, the Red Cross focused on service to veterans and enhanced its programs in safety training, accident prevention, home care for the sick and nutrition education. It also provided relief for victims of such major disasters as the Mississippi River floods in 1927 and the Depression during the 1930s.

The Second World War called upon the Red Cross to provide extensive services once again to the U.S. military, Allies and civilian war victims. At the military's request, the Red Cross initiated a national blood program that collected 13.3 million pints of blood for use by the armed forces.

After World War II, the Red Cross introduced the first nationwide civilian blood program that now supplies about 40 percent of the blood and blood products in this country. During the 1990s, it engineered a massive modernization of its blood services operations to improve the safety of its blood products. It continued to provide services to members of the armed forces and their

families, including during the Korean, Vietnam and Gulf wars. The Red Cross also expanded its services to include civil defense, CPR/AED training, HIV/AIDS education and the provision of emotional care and support to disaster victims and their survivors. It helped the federal government form the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and serves as a principal supplier of mass care in federally declared disasters.

While closely associated with the federal government in the promotion of its objectives, the Red Cross is an independent, volunteer-led organization, financially supported by voluntary public contributions and cost-reimbursement charges.

LINKS:

[Clara Barton Virtual Tour](#)

For more about the history of the American Red Cross, visit the online museum at:

<http://www.redcross.org/museum/history/index.asp>

[100 Significant Dates in American Red Cross history](#) (PDF link)

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