

When you give blood, everybody wins!



The Armed Services Blood Program (ASBP) has come under fire recently in Greensboro, N.C., and Columbus, Ohio, due ironically, to a groundswell of support from passionate individuals who are not active-duty military, but who wish to offer their blood – a most precious commodity – to help save the lives of our troops. These individuals who want to support the Armed Services Blood Program in its mission—to supply blood and blood products to service

members and their families in both peace and war—want to know why they are not called on to volunteer as blood donors.

Who can give blood to the Armed Services Blood Program?

Donor eligibility guidance by Department of Defense, Health Affairs (DoD-HA) stipulates that the ASBP accept donations from active-duty military, their immediate family, retirees, and government employees. Although, there have been occasions when regional military donor centers collect blood from communities with strong ties to their local installation, ASBP protocols to-date discourage such blood drives.

The protocols that govern the ASBP are both economically and medically sound explains Navy Commander Michael C. Libby, director of the Armed Services Blood Program Office.

“Collection practices within the Armed Services Blood Program are designed towards self-sufficiency in blood collection and blood product manufacturing for the purpose of operational security, and efficient use of taxpayer dollars,” Libby said.

ASBP protocols also address operational issues: Blood Donor Centers are to be located on military installations with a sizeable donor population; strict quality control, testing and processing procedures (stricter, even than what FDA guidelines require) must be met, and if mobile drives are conducted, the drives must take place on Department of Defense (DoD) property.

“This strict regulation of the entire blood collection process, from dedicated donor to seriously injured soldier ensures the security, availability and integrity of the blood transfused,” Libby said. “I cannot emphasize enough, how important the ASBP mission is to our military family, and to the military medical personnel who need every countermeasure available in their fight to save lives.”

In addition to serving the military medical community and its patients, the protocols followed by the ASBP help to ensure that the blood needs of the nation are met concurrent with the blood needs of the military community.

Will the ASBP change its policies?

The ASBP has put its current policy and guidance protocols under review within the Department of Defense (DoD) to address the outpouring of support from the many supporters within the civilian community. Veterans groups and family members of fallen soldiers, and other supportive groups unable to access military installation blood donor centers have reached out to their state and federal legislators, as well as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to ask for a change in DoD practices, and ultimately to ensure they can donate blood directly to the Armed Services Blood Program. Therefore, policy may indeed change.

Can civilian blood collection agencies guarantee where donated blood goes?

While the patriotic outreach of civilians is welcomed and lauded, it should be noted that even when donating to civilian blood programs it can be difficult to ensure that your blood goes to one specific individual.

“No one specific donated unit can be guaranteed to go to one specific person except under specialized situations requiring extreme labeling and control procedures,” points out Sharon Pavlovsky of America’s Blood Centers. “Once a unit is processed, it is numbered and becomes part of the general inventory,” Pavlovsky said.

And remember, for those times when families of service members are treated at civilian hospitals and require blood, they rely on the same blood supply that the general public uses. Blood donations to a civilian blood program still help to take care of the troops we depend on to take care of our nation.

Media reports accuse mismanagement.

Media reports have taken the position that asking only those individuals within the military community to donate, is evidence of mismanagement, instead of realizing that the protocols are due, in part, to efficient management of taxpayer dollars.

A much cited figure of \$250.00 per unit for the ASBP to purchase blood from civilian agencies is not accurate. The average “cost” of blood per unit is \$180.00 and is dependant upon the type of product, market prices, and regional prices, among other variables. Most are unaware of the fact that all blood programs purchase blood when there is a need for a specific type or an emergency blood need arises. Also, most individuals do not know that the so-called cost of blood is due to the process by which a unit of blood is collected from the donor and then prepared for a recipient. This is true for any blood agency, DoD or civilian. Thus, the cost for a unit of blood covers donor education, collection (people and materials), testing (for infectious diseases), processing, storage and distribution.

It is important to note that in areas where the military does not have a donor center, or in locations with a sufficient donor pool to support both ASBP and civilian collections, the civilian agencies (American Red Cross and America's Blood Centers, for example) may also be invited to draw donors. Another reason that it remains imperative for civilian blood programs and the military blood program to operate in a spirit of cooperation so that during this time of increasing need for volunteer donors, those who unfailingly step up and offer to donate are encouraged to continue giving!

When you give blood everybody wins!

The most important component of the national blood supply is the donor. For those who want to give blood to support the troops and are not currently able to do so, simply ask the next soldier you meet how they feel about you giving blood to support your local community. It's a pretty safe bet he or she will encourage you to give the gift of life.

Please give blood.