On the morning of July 24, 1915, more than 2,500 Western Electric employees boarded the lake passenger steamer Eastland to cast off from the Chicago River dock at the Clark Street Bridge for a company outing to Michigan City. Immediately as the ship slipped away from the dock, it began to tilt to the right and slowly roll over on its side. In a matter of minutes, it settled on the mud of the river bottom.

Some of those on board jumped into the water and swam ashore, but 844 individuals lost their lives before rescuers reached them, making the Eastland disaster by far the worst in the city’s history in terms of loss of life.

The event marked the first disaster response effort of the fledgling American Red Cross of Chicago which had been organized a mere six weeks earlier. Within an hour of the episode the Red Cross was on the scene. In a simultaneous effort, members and volunteers of the Red Cross were rescuing victims, providing medical aid and offering counseling for those bereaved by the tragedy. The Red Cross provided the core leadership and organization that made the relief efforts of the Eastland disaster effective and swift. They set up operations providing First Aid as needed. They comforted the traumatized family members of victims. They also helped other relief agencies set up offices on the scene. Amongst the horror and chaos of the day the Red Cross remained calm, structured and efficient.

The name of the Red Cross was established thereafter as prestigious and professional on-scene relief force as well as post-crisis stronghold. The organization worked with the community to raise $200,000 dollars in relief aid for the affected families in what may have been the first organized corporate and individual disaster fundraising drive in Chicago. The incident, although tragic, provided the City of Chicago with a sense of a true internal support system – a system realized through the help and collaborative efforts performed by the Chicago Red Cross.
The Chicago chapter faced its first war relief operation when America entered World War I in 1917. Attempting to be an efficient force during wartimes, the chapter formed a number of new subdivisions and programs. The Motor Corps, one such subdivision, was composed of a band of dedicated, fearless women willing to learn to operate cars in order to provide additional ambulance services as needed. In addition, the chapter organized their first public course offerings designed to educate Chicago citizens in personal hygiene, first aid, and care for the sick. It was imperative in a time of war that professional medical care was reserved for dire situations.

The chapter’s efforts expanded domestically as well as abroad. At home Chicago citizens aided the war effort with knitting and sewing committees that manufactured war garments, injury dressings and comforters to be shipped immediately to the soldiers fighting under relentlessly difficult conditions in Europe. A corps of canteen members provided soldiers with parcels consisting of hygiene and recreational supplies. First signs of the Junior Red Cross surfaced as a junior auxiliary committee learned to sew and knit for the soldiers. Housewives were compensated with cash for donating their “junk” to be recycled for military supplies. These tireless efforts of the Chicago chapter paid off as the final report boasted the production of 221,282,838 total supplies donated for the war.

Chicago’s chapter proved to be a major resource to alleviate the burden of war upon the nation. Those who did not fight the actual war were empowered by the Red Cross to make their mark in the American effort toward victory. Women, children and elderly alike all had the opportunity to employ their skills, donate and conserve. These efforts resulted in achieving a feeling of unity and nationality shared between soldiers on the frontlines and those on the home front.
In 1929 when America’s economy suffered the biggest decline the world has ever seen, the stock market crash sent millions of Americans spiraling into poverty and deprivation. At this time in Chicago, no welfare was available to the thousands of families left without ample food or provisions. The Red Cross of Chicago switched gears from an international focus to local aid. The Red Cross initiated a Bundle Day event sponsored by local women’s groups to donate spare blankets to families occupying buildings without heating. In addition to providing warmth, the Red Cross made strides in the elimination of widespread hunger woes. In 1932, 120,000 sacks of flour were distributed by the Red Cross to families throughout the city. This was one of the Red Cross’ first real local large scale relief efforts and it ensured the survival of thousands of Chicago’s devastated residents.
The focus again shifted back to international issues with the onset of World War II. On the homefront, Red Cross began a campaign to greatly increase mass blood drives and training for home nurses whose skills might be needed abroad. Just as soon as troops began to be sent overseas, Red Cross again experienced enormous popularity at home among citizens wanting to take part in the war effort.

World War II was a catalyst for the growth of Red Cross community services. In 1940, Junior Red Cross had expanded to over 1,000 schools in the Chicago district alone. In addition to this phenomenon, over 1,000 people a month achieved certification in life saving skills. Phone lines were being added to headquarters to accommodate the demands of the population for Red Cross involvement. Will County’s sudden growth caused the Red Cross to outgrow its facility and resulted in a new headquarters building. By 1944, 10 new Corps had been added to the Red Cross organization in Chicago and volunteer hours averaged 108 a person. The Red Cross was now clearly at the forefront of disaster operations and military support in Chicago.

World War II also reflected the humanity and sensitivity that distinguished Red Cross aid. Providing support to those with death claims became one of the most challenging and significant tasks that faced the Red Cross at this time. As World War II claimed more lives, Red Cross helped ease family grief and provide financial security to the surviving families and individuals. Each death claim reported to the Red Cross prompted a personal visit by a volunteer who gave both financial and emotional support.

The first and second world wars shaped the direction of the Red Cross. The demand for Red Cross services in Chicago was so great at this time that the Red Cross added to their curriculum 10 new departments in a span of several months.

Women were scarcely represented in the armed forces. The Red Cross provided a meaningful venue for their participation in the war effort. These opportunities helped women alleviate anxiety over loved ones stationed overseas and provided a sense of purpose.
In the postwar era, the Red Cross in Chicago began a targeted focus on veteran military services. Blood collection campaigns increased as the needs of returning military victims grew. Special assistance efforts also were developed to help families regain a sound economic footing in the postwar environment.

In the midst of a great increase in veterans in need of assistance, the Red Cross also faced ongoing challenges. Polio was reaching epidemic proportions in the Chicago area, creating a dire need for trained nurses and hospital volunteers. Additionally, 1951 saw the most destructive flood to strike Illinois. Through the collaborative efforts of the Red Cross, $14,000 was raised in relief aid for the victims of the flood.

The 1950’s also saw the addition of two new administrative offices: the Office of Volunteers and the Community Fund Organization. These groups were added to facilitate the growing community interest around Red Cross activities.

In 1954, water safety course enrollments reached a record high and the Red Cross increased visual presence by manning information booths at 12 major public events in Chicago.

Children in the Junior Red Cross wrapped and addressed gifts.
Red Cross relief efforts gradually turned towards providing relief across the seas once again with the beginning of the Vietnam War. By 1967, 365 Chicago Red Cross volunteers were providing relief in Vietnam at 107 Red Cross stations.

The Chapter implemented two programs as part of the Vietnam War relief efforts. Through “Operation Contact,” volunteers telephoned, wrote and visited soldiers at the request of family members and loved ones. "Voices from Home" was a novel program which allowed individuals to record messages for servicemen overseas. This was the first war where technology made this special feature possible. The programs were met with an astounding number of requests and helped establish the Red Cross as the major military aid institution in Chicago. The Red Cross continued to orchestrate relief programs throughout the early 1970s, including programs to provide soldiers with Christmas gift bags and continuing domestic counseling and aid. This substantial effort by the Red Cross demonstrated the innovative abilities of the organization and its ability to handle heavy demand.

Chicago hosted the 1970 National Red Cross convention where Mayor Richard J. Daley opened the event and welcomed the 5,000 delegates from all fifty states. The Chicago chapter was the largest single chapter in America, having merged Will, Lake and Aurora counties plus the Chicago Chapter into the Mid-America Chapter. This endeavor unified Chicago communities into a single metropolitan area. The merger broadened the Red Cross’ reach in the area. By 1965, every school in northern Illinois had a Red Cross program. And in 1975, 90,000 pints of blood were collected through Chicago Red Cross blood drives.

With technology advances in the 1980 and 1990’s, the Chapter was able to improve military messaging and communications. Important messages which had previously taken days and even weeks to reach their designated targets were now able to be relayed in mere hours. This improved technology was particularly useful during the Gulf War of 1991, as well as during the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo. Although telephone communication is still most prevalent in disaster scenarios, e-mail allows up-to-the-minute updates. In an industry where time is critical, the age of technology has allowed for substantial improvements in Red Cross services.

The four Chicago metro chapters merged to form one chapter. This move allowed the Red Cross to meet the needs of the expanding Chicago community more efficiently. Will, Lake, Aurora and Chicago chapters merged to form the Mid-America chapter. Five years later Kendall County was added.

Preceding the Vietnam War, the streets of Saigon were overrun with orphaned children. The Chicago Red Cross donated its services in the form of medical care, transportation, diapers, food, baby bottles, blankets and, most importantly, loving care. Because of these efforts many children were rescued and adopted by loving families.

Every school in northern Illinois had a Red Cross program.
As the millennium quickly approached, people around the world prepared for a Y2K disaster. In Chicago, the Red Cross distributed Y2K preparation brochures and offered preparation workshops. The Chapter took its own precautions to safeguard from computer glitches as well, making sure that all computer data was backed up to endure any mishaps. The Red Cross also coordinated with the local emergency corps to provide speedy and efficient service on New Year’s Eve 1999. All systems were ready in waiting for any unexpected activity during the millennium celebration.

At the same time, the local chapter turned its attention to the international arena, helping refugees from Bosnia. Red Cross relayed messages between refugees and separated family and worked to reconnect family members. Additionally, the Red Cross assisted the International Committee of the Red Cross with DNA testing to help identify fatalities and provide peace of mind to the surviving loved ones. This element was an especially emotional and difficult task for Red Cross workers.

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The Greater Chicago Red Cross served more than 50,000 meals to stranded passengers at O’Hare and Midway airports and provided counseling to very distressed airport staff members. More than 85 local Red Cross volunteers were sent to New York to help with the relief effort and the local chapter, fearing there would be more injured victims, collected blood from 10,770 individuals. Community generosity soared and $35 million was raised for the Liberty Fund. Still today, Red Cross volunteers continue to provide counseling support to victims’ families.

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One of the most important lessons the American Red Cross of Greater Chicago learned from the September 11th attacks was the need to create a new, more efficient disaster operations center close to downtown Chicago but not in the middle of the Loop. On April 19, 2004, the chapter opened its new Rauner Center in the Illinois Medical District to serve the more than 8.1 million people in Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will Counties.

We also learned from September 11th the importance of individuals, workplaces and schools to be prepared for any and all disasters including weapons of mass destruction. To that end, the American Red Cross of Greater Chicago launched an intensive new Together We Prepare educational effort to train individuals what to do in the face of a life-threatening emergency. The chapter also created the important Ready When The Time Comes corporate volunteer program to train individuals to be ready to volunteer and respond to local disasters, a program that is now rolling out across the nation.

Each and every day in the local community the American Red Cross of Greater Chicago responds to victims of three to five residential fires offering them food, clothing, shelter and counseling that will help them get back on their feet. In an effort to reduce the number of single family fires, the chapter began a Team FireStopper program that assists residents of high risk neighborhoods with fire prevention activities. In the past five years, more than 1,000 families have been helped with this program.

In this 90th year of the chapter, more than 400,000 individuals were helped by the American Red Cross of Greater Chicago. Most were trained in lifesaving skills; many were helped to recover from a personal disaster. Thousands of military families received assistance reaching their loved ones at times of family emergencies and hundreds of individuals separated from families by disasters were reconnected. In addition, hundreds of thousands of victims of the 2004 Florida hurricanes were able to rebuild their lives with the millions of dollars raised in Chicago by the Red Cross.

Through the work of the American Red Cross of Greater Chicago, emergencies are prevented, lives are saved and needs caused by disaster in our local community are met. But we don’t do it alone. We rely on hundreds of partner organizations and thousands of volunteers to help with the mission to prevent, prepare for and respond to emergencies.

As we celebrate this important milestone, we know the history of the American Red Cross of Greater Chicago is a reflection of a history of those citizens of Chicago who are ever caring, selfless and true local heroes. Working together, we will continue to save lives.