On frigid winter mornings — if you get up early enough — you might see them loading their vans, preparing to drive hundreds of miles on snowy, icy roads to deliver lifesaving blood to a hospital halfway across the state. On scorching summer nights — if you’re up late enough — you might find them saying goodbye to their blurry-eyed families as they prepare to open an emergency wildfire shelter at a school in Plains, Montana, or respond to an apartment fire in Pocatello, Idaho.

They’re blood couriers and disaster action team veterans, duty officers and disaster health services members — the amazing volunteers of the Red Cross of Greater Idaho and Montana — and we couldn’t fulfill our mission without them.

As we celebrate Volunteer Appreciation Week, there’s no better time to take a deep breath and reflect on the countless sacrifices you, our volunteers, make to deliver vital services, not only to Idaho and Montana families, but also to those impacted by disasters well beyond our borders, in places like Sugarland, Texas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

It’s a rare person who’s willing to leave behind the comforts of home to face the hardships of a disaster deployment, helping those they’ve never met and may never see again.

They sleep on cots in crowded gymnasiums, work 12-hour days and fight back tears as they talk with families who have lost everything. But most of all, they understand that when hospitals need blood or displaced families need aid, saying no really isn’t an option.

It’s a true testament to their character. As wildfires raging in all corners of Montana last summer, our volunteers barely had the chance to wash the smoke from their clothes before they were called away again to open another emergency shelter often in the darkness of night, 100 miles from home. On Labor Day weekend alone, Red Cross opened six wildfire shelters. It was a lot more labor than weekend for these dedicated individuals.

And their work doesn’t just stop when a shelter closes, a blood shipment gets delivered or a reconnection workshop winds down. They also put in plenty of hours in the classroom, staying up-to-date on their training and adding more skills to their toolbox.

For all of this and so much more, we can’t say you thank enough, not only to you, but also to your families who are left behind to pick up the slack, getting kids off to school on time, dinner on the table at night and making all this possible.

Though Volunteer Appreciation Week lasts only a few days, please realize how much we value what you do, every day, all year long. Thank you enough, not only to you, but also to your families who are left behind to pick up the slack, getting kids off to school on time, dinner on the table at night and making all this possible.

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FACES FROM THE FIELD

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