

# The Oregonian

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PORTLAND, OREGON

## Portland-based Mercy Corps set to open New York multimedia center

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NEW YORK — Aid workers for Portland-based Mercy Corps have battled misery in the world's most desperate corners for three decades. They have brought malaria medicine to sickened African kids, built schools amid Iraqi gunfire, loaned seed capital to Afghan weavers and helped Indonesian fishermen launch tsunami-battered boats.

Now the relief workers want to put you in their place — at least virtually — to gain support for helping more people.

In a prominent Manhattan location today, and next September in Portland, Mercy Corps will launch multimedia centers designed to raise the nonprofit's U.S. profile and attract a new generation of supporters. Bristling with high-definition video screens, the first-of-a-kind centers will enable visitors to think and act like relief workers, taking real-world steps to advance the humanitarian cause.

The "action centers" are the most visible features of Mercy Corps' move to redefine what aid agencies do. The expanding secular organization is forming unusual corporate alliances, adapting approaches from entrepreneurs, addressing effects of climate change and more forcefully stating policy views.

Mercy Corps, which ranks eighth among the top U.S.-based humanitarian organizations by revenue, is taking risks.

It's running its first bricks-and-mortar capital campaign, gunning for \$25 million during a global financial crisis. It's acquiring an Indonesian commercial



Bebeto Matthews/The Associated Press

George Devendorf, (left) Mercy Corps' vice president of global engagement and public affairs, and Ed Schlossberg, ESI Design founder and principal, test a display screen Wednesday in New York at the Action Center to End World Hunger. Mercy Corps will open the Manhattan center today and another one next September at its new Portland global headquarters.

bank to support microlending. It's driving up overhead to 11 percent of its ballooning \$308 million annual global budget, a share that could concern donors.

Even the action centers are risky, given the organization's lack of experience creating public attractions and drawing visitors.

But Chief Executive Neal Keny-Guyer notes that governments, foundations and other organizations committed a record \$165 million to Mercy Corps during its most recent quarter. Keny-Guyer believes the agency can stave off bureaucracy and stay nimble.

"That culture is just really baked into our DNA and the kind of people we attract," Keny-Guyer says. "The driving force still has to be innovation and front-line flexibility and moving decision-making as close to the program action as you can."

### Aiming to inspire

Founded in 1979 to aid Cambodian refugees, Mercy Corps has expanded from makeshift headquarters on Portland's Lair Hill to employ 3,500 in 38 nations. The organization helps

victims of wars and natural disasters help themselves, moving swiftly from cash-for-work programs to locally shaped recovery projects.

Mercy Corps' example has influenced other humanitarian agencies in moving away from conventional handout programs that foster dependency. The organization works across conflicts, bringing feuding sects together in Iraq, for instance, to advocate for rights of the disabled.

The agency has rapidly responded to a succession of wars and natural disasters. Internet appeals and direct mail have boosted contributions in what Paul Dudley Hart, senior vice president, calls "a sad inverse relationship" between the health of the world and the state of Mercy Corps' finances.

Now the organization aims to inspire a generation of high school students, among others, to become activists and donors. The New York Action Center to End World Hunger, with an understated Mercy Corps logo, also features other humanitarian agencies traditionally considered competitors.

The lower Manhattan center occupies a 4,000-square-foot corner storefront between a new Hudson River commuter-ferry terminal and the

former World Trade Center towers. It's a preview of the Portland action center, which will fill 4,500 square feet of ground-floor space in Mercy Corps' \$32 million headquarters under construction at Southwest First Avenue and Ankeny Street.

Provocative signs on the New York center invite passers-by to enter if they have anywhere from a minute to a lifetime.

Inside, on short video clips, field workers show vignettes of their days helping build roads or install wells. A giant interactive Google Earth display enables visitors to zoom in on humanitarian hot spots.

## ACTION CENTERS

### New York

**What:** Action Center to End World Hunger

**Opens:** Today

**Location:** 6 River Terrace, Battery Park City, opposite the Irish Hunger Memorial

**Concept:** High-tech interactive displays put visitors in the shoes of aid workers, suggesting real-world actions to fight hunger and poverty.

**Events:** A week of tours, poetry readings, celebrity appearances, children's programs and hunger-appropriate comedy

Web site: [actioncenter.org](http://actioncenter.org)

### Portland

**What:** Action center under construction

**Opens:** September 2009

**Location:** In Mercy Corps' new global headquarters, Skidmore Fountain Building, downtown Portland

**Concept:** High-definition multimedia, like the New York center, but more emphasis on aid and development, as opposed to hunger

**Audience:** School groups, individuals of all ages

Visitors gravitate to touch-screen displays that brief them on themes and countries -- governance and Indonesia, for example -- the way aid workers size up conditions when they arrive at emergencies. Visitors collect facts, hear from a wide spectrum of people at the scene and consider actions.

"The idea is to listen to people talk, strategize about what to do -- and then you can actually do something," says Ed Schlossberg, founder and principal at ESI Design, an internationally known New York firm that designed Mercy Corps' \$5.3 million center.

Those with merely a New York minute to spare can sign a petition asking Congress to help eliminate tropical diseases (Action 329). Those with a year can apply to mentor aspiring entrepreneurs in Guatemala (Action 327).

Columbia University graduate student Sarah Bever, a former high school teacher who will lead school groups through the center, once volunteered in a Kenyan slum.

"A lot of American teenagers feel overwhelmed sometimes and get immobilized," says Bever, 26. "I want to help empower American youth."

## "Home front" fight

Field workers pushed Mercy Corps managers during a 2006 meeting in Nepal to open what George Devendorf, vice president of global engagement and public affairs, calls a "home front" in the fight against hunger and poverty.

"They said, 'Look, we're just holding the line out here; that's all we're doing,'" Devendorf says. "'You guys have to start talking with the folks on the home front about just how enormous the challenges we face are.'"

Michael Cooper, a Mercy Corps manager back from Iraq, urged skeptical managers to compete with other humanitarian organizations for a Battery Park City Authority grant providing the display space across from New York's Irish Hunger Memorial. Cooper sketched the concept on a napkin and enlisted Schlossberg.

Battery Park gave Mercy Corps a 30-year lease, renewable for another 30

years, at \$1 a year. "We paid upfront," Devendorf quips.

David Holdridge, Middle East program director, is preparing to connect internally displaced Arab youths to the action centers for dialogue with American young people.

Holdridge is pleased that Mercy Corps is staking public positions to influence U.S. policy toward developing countries. In June, for example, the organization issued a report lambasting U.S. military reconstruction projects in Iraq.

In March, Mercy Corps crossed lines between nonprofits and corporations by announcing a partnership with Wal-Mart Stores Inc. to help poor farmers in Guatemala grow produce for the chain. In another novel deal, the agency secured support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to buy an Indonesian commercial bank that will back organizations making microloans

Mercy Corps managers -- driven by "new philanthropists" who want measurable, replicable returns -- pick projects they can sustain and adapt elsewhere. The Indonesian Bank of Banks, for example, is designed to expand to the Philippines.

With high ambitions, Mercy Corps, like other nonprofits, faces a growing challenge at home, where Dudley Hart, the senior vice president, seeks donations during the financial crisis. The organization has raised \$6.5 million, about one-quarter of the goal, in its capital campaign.

As the New York action center prepares for an estimated 75,000 visitors in its first year, regular fundraising continues. "We're hoping for the best," Dudley Hart says, "and preparing for something less than that."

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