

Getting Involved – Volunteer in Your Community

by Irene Rozansky, CEO
R&A Crisis Management Services

The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) concept was developed and implemented by the Los Angeles Fire Department in 1985. They recognized that citizens would very likely be on their own during the early stages of a catastrophic disaster, possibly due to the size of the area, lost communications, and impassable roads. With some basic training in disaster survival and rescue skills, the citizens could help themselves and others survive until assistance arrived. FEMA adopted the concept and expanded it to include all hazards and made this training available nationally in 1993. In 2003, the Citizens Corps program was created to harness the power of every individual through education, training, and volunteer service to make communities safer, stronger, and better prepared. CERT was selected as one of the primary programs offered to the American public to meet this challenge.

There are three keys to a successful community-based preparedness program.

Planning is a key to success.

Studies of human behavior following disasters have shown that groups working together in the disaster period perform more effectively if there has been prior planning for the response. These studies show that organized grassroots efforts may be more successful if they are woven into the social and political fabric of a community – neighborhood associations, schools, places of worship, workplaces, and other existing organizations. Effective response therefore requires comprehensive planning and coordination of all who will be involved – government, volunteer groups, private businesses, schools and community groups.

Community-based preparedness planning, similar to enterprise-based planning, allows us to be prepared for and respond to anticipated disruptions and potential hazard following a critical incident. Through pre-event planning, neighborhoods and worksites can work together to help reduce injuries, loss of lives, and property damage. Community preparedness will enhance the ability of individuals and neighborhoods to reduce their emergency needs and to manage their existing resources.

CERT organization is a key to success.

As each CERT is organized and trained, its members select a team leader and alternate leader and identify a meeting location, or staging area, to be used in the event of a disaster. The staging area is where the public first responders will interact with CERTs. Having a centralized contact point makes it possible to communicate damage assessments and allocate volunteer resources more effectively. In an actual disaster, CERTs are deployed progressively and as needs dictate because damage may vary considerably from one location to another.

Members are taught to assess their own needs and those in their immediate environment first. CERT members who encounter no need to their immediate area then report to their staging area, where they will be assigned roles based on current needs.

CERT training program is a key to success.

CERT training covers basic skills that are important to know in a disaster when emergency services are not available. With training and practice, and by working as a team, a CERT volunteer will be able to do the greatest good for the greatest number of victims after a disaster, while avoiding becoming a victim or another statistic.

Acting as individuals first, then later as members of teams, trained CERT volunteers can fan out within their assigned areas, extinguishing small fires, turning off natural gas inlets to damaged homes, performing light search and rescue, and rendering basic medical treatment. Trained volunteers also offer an important potential workforce to service organizations in nonhazardous functions such as shelter support, crowd control, and evacuation.

The CERT training program includes sessions on: disaster preparedness, fire safety, disaster medical operations, light search and rescue, disaster psychology, terrorism, and the CERT organization model. Classes are taught by trained emergency personnel, including firefighters and Emergency Medical Services (EMT) personnel. The program consists of 20 hours of training and emphasizes hands-on practice, including a mock disaster.

CERT teams remain active in the community before a disaster strikes, sponsoring events such as drills, neighborhood clean up, and disaster education fairs. Trainers offer periodic refresher sessions to CERT volunteers to reinforce the training and to keep participants involved and practiced in their skills.

CERT benefits you and your community.

Besides the obvious benefit of preparing us all for the vital role of caring for ourselves and others in times of crisis, additional benefits include:

- Brining together the volunteer and first responder communities to promote the concept that everyone has a role in making their community safer, stronger and better prepared;
- Meeting and working along side your fellow community members;
- Expanding your knowledge of your community;
- Demonstrating your leadership and your personal commitment to the safety of your community;
- Connecting your business to its community:
 - Showing community outreach from your business or organization;
 - Involving local CERT organizations in your business or organization mock disaster exercise;
 - Creating a corporate policy and value statement that encourages your workers to participate in community programs such as CERT;
 - Having your entire emergency response team receive CERT training; and
 - Identifying in what ways your company or organization has a good "fit" with the goals of the CERT program.

Over 2000 CERT community programs are listed on a website under the Directory of CERT Programs by state. To see if your community is listed, visit <https://www.citizencorps.gov/cert/>

Final note.

I am a CERT volunteer in my community. The training was time well-spent. Most of the benefits mentioned above have already been recognized for me personally and for my client organizations who I have gotten involved. Try it. You just might like it!

References:

- Citizen Corps: A Guide for Local Officials.
- DHS | Fact Sheet: Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Program (www.dhs.gov)
- CERT Participant Manual, January 2005. Revised for IEMA by University of Missouri Fire and Rescue Training Institute.

[Get more valuable information at the R&A Crisis Management Services website.](http://www.raconsulting.net)
<http://www.raconsulting.net>