

Community emergency response teams and community disaster planning

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INTRODUCTION

In the days following September 11, 2001, most emergency managers developed a renewed intensity in their emergency preparedness efforts. Emergency managers have traditionally been vigilant in planning for a natural disaster (i.e., hurricane, flood, snowstorm, etc.). But the new threat of terrorism is now in the forefront of all planning. This is not to say that emergency managers did not learn from prior terrorist acts like the first World Trade Center bombing or the Oklahoma City bombing. The September 11th attacks, however, were on a much larger scale than had ever been seen before in the United States and one which resulted in the greatest loss of life to a civilian population in this country in modern times. Emergency managers are exposed to emergency situations on a regular basis. Some of these emergencies can be handled very quickly and without any mishaps, while others require the emergency manager to call in additional resources to help. In the end, what it comes down to is the planning the emergency manager has done with the involvement of the leadership and members in the community in which he serves.

COMMUNITY DISASTER PLANNING

The emergency preparedness plans that an emergency manager has created are an established organizational structure for how to respond to almost any type of emergency or disaster situation. This structure is designed to assist with the command and control for that particular emergency or disaster situation. As we have learned from past experiences, an emergency or disaster situation can occur at any time, anywhere, and to any community.

An emergency manager must, as the Boy Scout motto states, "Be Prepared." As we all know, an event becomes an emergency because it was unexpected. A "small" emergency can quickly grow and become a "large" emergency if there is inadequate preparation (which includes both equipment and personnel) to respond in a timely manner. This is why every emergency manager has prepared and constantly reviewed their emergency operations plan. This will help to identify what emergencies or disaster situations can be handled locally and when outside help for that emergency or disaster situation will be needed. An emergency manager might have years of experience and feel confident with their own personal response. The unknown factor for the emergency manager is the level of response he can expect from his staff and first responders. Will enough respond? Will they all be able to respond? And if not, the question in the back of the emergency manager's mind is what does he do then? Preparing an emergency operations plan is only part of the planning for a community emergency or disaster situation. The emergency manager must also seek out a very rare and needed resource in these times, which are volunteers. In times of an emergency or disaster situation, first responders (police, fire, and EMS) will most likely be the first on location, and depending upon the magnitude of the event, these first responders can quickly become overwhelmed. They will quickly need help in order to save lives and property.

In the days following the events on September 11, 2001, state and local government officials realized an increased opportunity for citizens to become an integral part of protecting the homeland and supporting the local first responders. Officials agree

that the formula for ensuring a more secure and safer homeland consists of preparedness, training, and citizen involvement in supporting first responders. It was in this spirit that in January 2002 President George W. Bush launched USA Freedom Corps to capture the spirit of service that has emerged throughout our communities following the terrorist attacks. The primary feature of the USA Freedom Corps was called Citizen Corps, which was created to help coordinate volunteer activities to make our communities safer, stronger, and better prepared to respond to any emergency situation. It provides opportunities for people to participate in a range of activities to make their families, their homes, and their communities safer from the threats of crime, terrorism, and disasters of all kinds. The Citizen Corps program builds on the successful efforts already in place in many communities around the country to prevent crime and respond to emergencies. One key program that originally started through local innovation is the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). CERT is the foundation of Citizen Corps and emblematic of this national approach toward citizen participation in community safety.

Citizen Corps is made up of five key components. The first program under Citizen Corps is CERT. This program educates people about disaster preparedness and trains them in basic disaster response skills such as fire safety, light search and rescue, and disaster medical operations. The second program is the Fire Corps, which promotes the use of citizen advocates to enhance the capacity of resource-constrained fire and rescue departments at all levels: volunteer, combination, and career. Citizen advocates can assist local fire departments in a range of activities including fire safety outreach, youth programs, and administrative support. The third program is USA on Watch, which is an updated version of the older Neighborhood Watch programs. USA on Watch incorporates terrorism awareness education into the existing crime prevention mission, while also serving as a way to bring residents together to focus on emergency preparedness and emergency response training. The fourth program is the Medical Reserve Corp (MRC). The

MRC program strengthens communities by helping medical, public health, and other groups by offering their expertise throughout the year, as well as during local emergencies and other times of community need. MRC volunteers work in coordination with existing local emergency response programs and also supplement existing community public health initiatives such as outreach and prevention, immunization programs, blood drives, case management, care planning, and other efforts. The fifth program under Citizen Corps is Volunteers in Police Services (VIPS). The purpose of VIPS is to enhance the capacity of state and local law enforcement to utilize volunteers. VIPS serves as a gateway to resources and information for and about law enforcement volunteer programs. Of all the organizations that fall under Citizen Corps, CERT is the one program that has the biggest impact in the area of Community Disaster Planning. CERT members are taught basic fire suppression, basic medical treatment, basic search and rescue, an introduction into the incident command system, and an overview of the CERT organization. But the idea of Community Emergency Response Teams has been around for many years before the September 11th attacks.

HOW DID CERT START?

The idea to train volunteers from the community to assist emergency service personnel during large natural disasters began in February of 1985. A group of Los Angeles officials went to Japan to study its extensive earthquake preparedness plans. This group encountered an extremely homogenous society that had taken extensive steps to train entire neighborhoods in one aspect of alleviating the potential devastation that would follow a major earthquake. These single-function neighborhood teams were trained in fire suppression, light search and rescue operations, first aid, or evacuation. After the 8.1 magnitude earthquake that struck Mexico City in September of 1985, an investigation team from Los Angeles discovered that while there was no formal training program in place, large groups of volunteers organized themselves and performed light search and rescue operations. These volunteers were credited with more than

800 successful rescues but, unfortunately, more than 100 of these untrained volunteers died during rescue operations. What was learned was that a plan was needed to train volunteers to help themselves and others, and become part of an organized government response and an essential part of the preparedness, survival, and recovery after a large disaster. In 1986, the Los Angeles Fire Department developed a pilot program to train a group of leaders in a neighborhood watch organization. The idea was to develop a multi-functional volunteer response team with the ability to perform basic fire suppression, light search and rescue, and basic first aid. Expansion of the initial program beyond the initial 30 members was not possible at the time due to limited city resources. It was not until the October 1987 Whittier Narrows earthquake, which underscored the threat of an area-wide major disaster, that the city of Los Angeles then took a more aggressive role in protecting its citizens. The objectives included education and training of the public and government sectors in disaster preparedness through the development and training of a network of CERTs. In 1993, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), after reviewing the success of CERT in Los Angeles, decided to take this concept to communities nationwide and make it applicable to all emergencies. The CERT program, however, did not gain wide acceptance until after the events of September 11th, when in 2002 it became part of the Citizen Corps. The Citizen Corps thus served as a unifying structure to link a variety of related volunteer activities for expanding a community's resources for crime prevention and emergency response.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM?

CERTs are a positive and realistic approach to emergency and disaster situations in which citizens will initially be on their own and their actions can make a genuine difference. When the local emergency managers prepare for everyday emergencies, the need for trained personnel who can assist in all hazardous situations is critical not only in preparedness but in planning, response, and mitigation. Such personnel are a resource that every emergency manager

needs. Initially, CERT programs were developed to assist communities in taking care of themselves in the immediate aftermath of a major disaster, when first responders are overwhelmed or unable to respond due to communication or transportation difficulties. As the CERT concept has taken hold across the country, however, CERTs have become much more than originally envisioned. CERTs have proven themselves to be an active and vital part of their communities' preparedness and response capability, thus giving the emergency manager additional resources to call upon.

COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM TRAINING

CERT members nationwide receive the same basic training, including: how to manage utilities and put out small fires; control bleeding and treat for shock; provide basic first aid, including opening airways; set up and work a triage station; do light search and rescue, and to rescue victims safely; and understand how they fall within the incident command structure. The national CERT training material, while being as current as possible, regularly needs to be updated and modified. Due to the wide range of hazards across the country, and the fact that many communities develop their own protocols and procedures, the national training material will always need to be supplemented with the local protocols and procedures in order for any CERT team to function successfully within their community. CERT members must keep their safety in mind as their first priority. CERT members must know their capabilities and the limitations of their training and equipment, and work within those limitations. In addition to the CERT member's own safety, members are instructed to make sure their family is safe first whenever an emergency or disaster situation occurs. Once CERT members have completed the basic classes, they are then encouraged to continue developing their skills through a variety of training options. These options include online classes through the FEMA EMI web site; participating in periodic drills and exercises to keep basic skills sharp; and advanced classes on topics such as American Red Cross Sheltering, the incident command system, and communications.

USING THE CERT TEAM

When working with a CERT team, you need to develop a plan to continue working with the team after they have completed the basic course. You should not just teach them and forget them, which unfortunately is an all too common practice among some emergency managers. Emergency managers should continue to promote and develop their teams, keeping in mind that team members can be used in a wide range of services when disaster strikes. For instance, they can be used in the emergency operations center to answer phones, assist in taking notes at section chiefs meetings, used as runners between the emergency operations center and the incident command post, and to staff and run shelters. In the field, they can assist in the triage areas and help transporting patients. And, if your staging area is set up correctly, you can have them assist or even run it.

The use of CERTs in nondisaster events continues to evolve. Team members can assist during large community events such as parades and concerts by helping direct traffic. CERT members may also assist in missing person searches, provided they have the proper training. In addition, members should assist and participate with other emergency personnel when a large scale drill or exercise is planned. Ultimately, how CERT team members are utilized is up to their supervisor (usually someone within the Office of Emergency Management) who should always remember that his CERT team members are volunteers—unpaid personnel whose work and sacrifice should be appreciated on a regular basis.

LEVEL OF COMMITMENT IS A TWO-WAY STREET

The men and women who join CERT are unpaid volunteers who come from all walks of life. They have completed the 10 weeks of classroom instruction in addition to numerous “hands-on” exercises, culminating with a final exam in which they put all their skills to the test. These CERT members have clearly shown a commitment and dedication to helping others in a time of need and are willing to be away from their families when necessary. Such dedication

is a testament to their commitment to help their neighbors and their community during a time of need.

For CERT teams to remain effective, however, there must also be a strong commitment from the municipality and officials who oversee the team. For CERT teams to develop and flourish, ongoing guidance and strong leadership must be present. The emergency manager, for instance, should develop a Standard Operations Procedures (SOPs) manual so that all CERT members understand their role, know what is expected of them, and understand how the organization works. As part of this process, the emergency manager should work closely with the CERT team to develop a clear procedure for activating and communicating with the team when a disaster occurs.

CERT TEAMS AND THE FUTURE

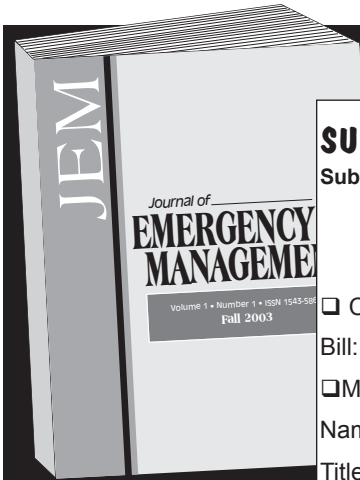
CERTs have become a big part of community disaster planning. Since they provide a committed and trained group of people who not only can assist locally but in another state if needed, these teams have become an important resource for the emergency manager. To illustrate, let me offer a personal note. The township in which I work has a CERT membership of approximately 60 individuals from the community, a membership that is not from years of recruiting but only months. Our CERT program had its first class graduate in March of 2005 and the second class in May of 2005. Members are both young and old, some with businesses in the town. We have worked together to develop a SOP manual for the team. The members have listed the organization with both the federal and state government as a tax-exempt charitable volunteer organization. And they all express a deep desire and commitment to help others in time of need, something they have already demonstrated through several efforts: in helping to search for a missing child, in calling over 240 local senior citizens during heat advisories, and in their willingness to help man cooling centers for these seniors. Our CERT team also helped play a key part in a neighboring community by helping to staff a shelter during recent flooding. With the growth of CERT teams, not just in my township but across America,

these dedicated men and women are now becoming a key component in not only emergency services but in community disaster preparedness and planning. How better to prepare and plan for an emergency than to involve the members of the community who are willing to be trained and help during a time of need.

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