

## LAW ENFORCEMENT AND COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS (CERT): HOW AGENCIES ARE UTILIZING VOLUNTEERS TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS GOALS

Over the past five years, catastrophic events have tested our nation's first responders and in many communities, stretched them to the limit. The terrorist attacks of 2001 and devastating natural disasters have demonstrated the importance of emergency preparedness for local and state emergency professionals and ordinary citizens. By providing citizens with the necessary training, skills, and equipment, communities can be better prepared to respond in the event of an emergency in their community.

### *History of CERT*

The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) concept was first developed and implemented by the Los Angeles City Fire Department (LAFD) in 1985. The training was created by LAFD to aid emergency personnel responding to wild fires and earthquakes. In partnership with the National Fire Academy, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) adopted the CERT training module and began promoting nationwide use of the CERT training in 1993. In cooperation with the LAFD, the CERT curriculum was expanded to apply to all hazards.

After the events of September 11, 2001, President Bush called upon all Americans to

dedicate at least 4,000 hours over their lifetime in service to others through the USA Freedom Corps initiative. Citizen Corps, a component of USA Freedom Corps, was created to provide opportunities for individuals to assist their community in emergency preparation through volunteering. CERT became one of the five Citizen Corps partner programs in 2002, along with Neighborhood Watch, Volunteers in Police Service, Medical Reserve Corps and Fire Corps. It is managed by the Department of Homeland Security. Today, there are more than 1,100 CERT teams in communities across the United States.



CERT training promotes a partnership between emergency services and the communities they serve. The goal is for emergency personnel to train members of neighborhoods, community organizations, and businesses in basic response skills. The CERT training course covers the topics of disaster preparedness; fire suppression; first

aid; search and rescue; disaster psychology; and team organization. At the conclusion of the course, students are required to complete a written exam and participate in a mock disaster activity to test their skills. CERT training not only equips citizens with useful skills, it also minimizes the impact when disaster strikes because residents know what they can do to help before and after first responders arrive. CERT members do not replace emergency personnel, rather they provide assistance until first responders arrive. In the event of a disaster, CERT members offer critical support to first responders by providing immediate assistance to victims and organizing spontaneous volunteers at disaster sites. In the event of an emergency, CERT teams can be called out by the appropriate authorities.

### *Newport, North Carolina, Police Department*

The Newport Police Department (NPD) serves a population of over 3,400 with a staff of seven sworn and three part-time reserve officers. Newport, in Carteret County, is a 15-minute drive from Atlantic Beach, which is part of the Crystal Coast region of North Carolina. The beaches of the Crystal Coast are on North Carolina's Southern Outer Banks.

#### *Newport CERT*

Newport is prone to hurricanes and typically experiences one per hurricane season. Due to this threat, NPD decided a CERT program would offer the invaluable training their residents need to assist their family and neighbors during a hurricane. NPD also views the CERT program as a force multiplier for their department. With the small size of NPD, as well as a community with all

volunteer fire and ambulance departments, emergency personnel in Newport could be easily overwhelmed during a disaster. NPD recognized this and saw the benefits a CERT program could offer their community and the department. Mainly, NPD viewed the CERT training as a way to educate and equip residents with needed skills they could use after a disaster



*Neighbors Helping Neighbors*

that would reduce low-level calls for service, such as removal of downed trees. The CERT team, equipped with these skills, could respond to these types of low-level calls, thereby freeing up area law enforcement to respond to high priority emergency calls during a disaster.

#### *Instituting a CERT Program*

NPD has received tremendous support in their endeavors from their town council, their county emergency management office and their county Citizen Corps coordinator. NPD received a grant through Citizen Corps that enabled them to purchase the necessary equipment for their CERT program. The department has a CERT trailer equipped with emergency gear and tools that the CERT team, once deployed, can bring to any scene. The department was also able to purchase an ID card machine that allows them to produce photo identification cards for each CERT team member.

To recruit members, NPD distributed informational flyers to area businesses, placed

advertisements in local newspapers, and offered information during their annual National Night Out activities in August. The community has embraced the CERT program, with over 15 citizens attending the first training in summer of 2004. NPD is gearing up to hold their third CERT training class in the fall of 2005. Once the volunteers have gone through the required CERT classes, all members take part in a mock-disaster drill to test their skills. CERT graduates receive a backpack stocked with emergency gear, such as a first-aid kit, flashlight, gloves, hardhat, and CERT vest.



#### *Practical Partnerships: American Red Cross and Newport CERT*

The Coastal Carolina Chapter of the American Red Cross (ARC), which covers Craven, Carteret, Pamlico, and Jones counties, was lacking a shelter operations team in the area. The Coastal Carolina Chapter partnered with NPD to train the NPD CERT team in shelter operations. The training included scenarios in which CERT members were assigned roles, such as shelter manager. NPD CERT team is now certified to set up and operate an ARC shelter in the event of a disaster or emergency in the area. The chapter hopes to train CERT members in other areas of disaster response as well.

#### *From CERT to VIPS: Institutionalizing Volunteers in NPD*

Many CERT members expressed interest in helping out the department in other ways and began assisting the department at DWI checkpoints and at community events. NPD recognized that offering volunteer opportunities outside of CERT would further benefit their department and the community and decided to implement a Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) program. After attending a VIPS training event, NPD began the process of structuring a VIPS program. The department plans to launch the program in the coming months.

#### *Clanton, Alabama, Police Department*

The Clanton Police Department (CPD) serves a population of 8,000 with a trained police force of 26 officers. Clanton is in Chilton County, in the center of Alabama. Equidistant from Birmingham and Montgomery, Clanton is a prime location for business and industry.

#### *CPD Explorers Program*

CPD restarted their Explorer program in 2004 after a period of dormancy. Law Enforcement Exploring is designed to introduce young men and women to law enforcement through hands-on career activities. CPD currently has 12 Police Explorers, aged 15-21. Demand is high for an Explorer program among high school students in Clanton and CPD is committed to offering interested youth a program with a focus on training and skills gathering. Alabama is prone to various types of severe weather conditions, including hurricanes, tornados, and ice storms. Due to these weather-related threats, CPD has concentrated the bulk of its Explorer training on emergency and disaster security, cleanup,

medical assistance, and search and rescue skills.

Following the recommendation of county emergency management, CPD Police Explorers completed the CERT training course and now serve as an organized CERT team that can respond to Clanton and surrounding communities in the event of an emergency. Explorers have also been trained in traffic control, security, and emergency shelter services, which includes the set-up and operation of shelters and support services to shelters.

The program is in the process of assembling a disaster response vehicle that will have emergency equipment such as generators, emergency lights, saws, axes, and other equipment that can be used to clean up a disaster scene. The team is also capable of establishing a mobile medical treatment unit in addition to providing support capabilities to fire units, EMA units, and other law enforcement units. In addition to their CERT training, the Explorers have received vehicle extrication training, which involves rescuing drivers trapped in their vehicles.

CPD Explorers had the opportunity to test their skills this summer when Hurricane Dennis hit their area in July. Due to a lack of medical personnel at a shelter for special needs patients, CPD was contacted to send their medically trained Explorers to staff the shelter and monitor patients. Explorers were also on hand to assist emergency personnel with security surrounding Hurricane Dennis.

#### *Program Benefits*

Through its Explorer program, CPD aims to offer youth a background in the field of law enforcement as well as real life skills they can

use in any profession they pursue. CPD does this by focusing on law enforcement, as well as fire, ambulance, and nursing training to provide their Explorers with a well-rounded skill set. One of the most important benefits of the program is exposing youth to their capabilities and offering them meaningful ways to contribute to their communities today and in the future by pursuing law enforcement careers. Incorporating CERT training into their program, CPD has prepared their Explorers with lifesaving skills they can use in their homes, neighborhoods, and communities.

#### *El Paso County, Colorado, Sheriff's Office*

El Paso County encompasses approximately 2,200 square miles of land in east central Colorado. The topography of the county varies from mountainous regions to flat prairie land. The most recent census estimates a total population of over 554,000 including the county seat, Colorado Springs.

The El Paso County Sheriff's Office (EPSO) employs 550 full-time staff, sworn and civilian, organized under three bureaus: the Detentions Bureau, the Law Enforcement Bureau, and the Support Services Bureau. EPSO's volunteer program falls under the purview of the Support Services Bureau with supervision from a part-time civilian coordinator. EPSO has several components to its volunteer program: the Citizen's Advisory Council; the Reserve Unit; the Cadet/Explorer Program; Victim Advocacy; Search and Rescue; the RACES (Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service) Program; Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous; the Detention and Patrol Chaplain Corps; Administrative/Clerical; and the EPSO CERT program.

*El Paso County CERT: The Beginning*

In recent decades, El Paso County has experienced blizzards, floods, tornadoes, and fires. To increase preparedness and prevention efforts, in 2003, the sheriff directed the commander of the Emergency Services Division (ESD) to oversee the CERT program's administration, training, and operations. According to the department's standard operating procedures (SOP), the EPSO CERT program is composed of specially trained volunteers that provide El Paso County residents and local organizations with training in the areas of disaster preparedness, fire suppression, basic disaster medical operations, disaster psychology, and light search-and-rescue operations. By the end of October 2005, the EPSO CERT program will have trained over 300 volunteers.

*Sustaining Volunteer Involvement*

Due to the unpredictable nature of many disasters, CERT volunteers may not be called into action over the course of several months. To keep trained community members involved and invigorated, EPSO offers CERT training classes several times throughout the year in addition to monthly meetings. Once trained, community members may continue to volunteer in other support activities such

as role-playing in scenarios for CERT classes, assisting in disaster preparedness exercises, or helping out with large-scale community events such as the El Paso County Fair.

The EPSO's CERT volunteers are working with the local American Red Cross chapter to provide assistance with displaced individuals as a result of Hurricane Katrina. In 2006 EPSO will add an advanced training component to its CERT curriculum. This advanced component will elaborate on the basic training concepts and incorporate advanced topics such as incident command system (ICS) and traffic control.

*Long-Term Goals*

EPSO's goal is to train as many community members as possible. The CERT training course has been tailored for and delivered to many different community units including corporate groups, school employees, students, victim advocates, and chaplain groups. EPSO now receives training assistance for the CERT program from 23 fire districts and five military bases in the county. While EPSO is responsible for the implementation and management of the CERT program, the work of its volunteers and its partnerships with fire and other emergency services agencies will help it achieve its goals.

### For Additional Information

Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT)  
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### VIPS Resources & Products of Interest

#### Registered VIPS Program Online Directory

- Law enforcement agencies can register their volunteer programs and search for others in the VIPS program directory.
- Citizens can locate volunteer opportunities with law enforcement agencies in their communities. The directory allows users to search by city, state, and type of program, such as CERT.

#### VIPS Online Resource Library

- Browse and download sample documents from law enforcement volunteer programs, such as application forms, program policies, volunteer handbooks, and many, many more.

#### VIPS Info

- Keep up-to-date with this monthly electronic newsletter that provides news and events about the VIPS Program and law enforcement volunteer activities across the country.

All resources and products can be found at [www.policevolunteers.org](http://www.policevolunteers.org).



The Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) Program works 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. VIPS is a Program Partner of Citizen Corps, an initiative helping to make communities across America safer, stronger, and better prepared for emergencies of all kinds.



The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) manages and implements the VIPS Program in partnership with and on behalf of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice.



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