

Historical to Present Perspective of Community Emergency Response Team (CERT)

Training for the Palatine Emergency Management Agency (PEMA)

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Abstract

This paper is a historical perspective of the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training program for the Palatine Emergency Management Agency (PEMA). PEMA is the coordinating agency for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery for the Village of Palatine, Illinois, a northwest suburb of Chicago with a population of over 68,000.

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I returned to my boyhood home in the town of Palatine, Illinois in 2002 after the passing of my mother. As the executor of her estate, I needed to get her affairs in order which included preparing her home for sale. I was one of three heirs, and after a series of events I settled the estate by buying-out my siblings and keeping the house.

Moving back to Palatine required me to leave a volunteer community service program I had previously been associated with for 15 years. I sought out similar volunteer opportunities in Palatine, and became a PEMA volunteer. It started by attending the CERT training program in 2004. In 2010, I became the agency's first Training Coordinator (a volunteer position) which included the responsibility of the CERT program

Identify Program or Discipline Area

The Village of Palatine, Illinois has an emergency management agency as part of the local government. This agency works with local, state and federal agencies in the area of emergency services. Though this agency has about 200 volunteer members, the actual full-time paid staff is comprised of a single person, the PEMA Coordinator. The agency's mission statement is:

It is the mission of the Palatine Emergency Management Agency to provide the highest level of emergency services to its residents and visitors by identifying hazards and vulnerabilities within its corporate limits and by mitigating the effects of, preparing for, responding to and recovering from emergencies and disasters whether natural or manmade. Palatine EMA prides itself in providing ongoing training in emergency preparedness to its staff and to its residents understanding that an educated and trained

public is paramount in lessening the effects a disaster may have on our community (“EMA Mission Statement,” 2011).

Part of the requirement to become a volunteer of PEMA is to attend and successfully complete CERT training. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA):

The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Program educates people about disaster preparedness for hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations. Using the training learned in the classroom and during exercises, CERT members can assist others in their neighborhood or workplace following an event when professional responders are not immediately available to help. CERT members also are encouraged to support emergency response agencies by taking a more active role in emergency preparedness projects in their community (“Community Emergency Response Teams,” 2014).

CERT training promotes a partnering effort between emergency services and the people they serve. The goal is for emergency personnel to train members of neighborhoods, community organizations, or workplaces in basic response skills. CERT trained members are then integrated into the emergency response capability for their area (Smith & Leahy, 2014).

Discuss the Evolution

The CERT concept was first developed and implemented by the Los Angeles City Fire Department (LAFD) in 1985. This was in response to the realization of the susceptibility to major natural disasters in that area and how easily they could overwhelm first responders. The Whittier Narrows earthquake in 1987 underscored the area-wide threat of a major disaster in California (“Community emergency response teams – Background,” 2012).

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recognized the importance of preparing citizens. By 1993 FEMA decided to make the concept and program available to communities nationwide, and had the Emergency Management Institute (EMI) and the National Fire Academy adopt and expand the CERT materials making them applicable to all hazards. In January 2002, CERT became part of the Citizen Corps, a unifying structure to link a variety of related volunteer activities to expand a community's resources for crime prevention and emergency response. The implementation of the CERT program is delegated down to the state level and then further down to a county or local level.

Palatine began offering CERT training, free of charge, to the residents and businesses in the village in the late spring of 2003. The same training is offered to individuals and groups in communities around the Palatine area (e.g., those towns within Township High School District 211) who do not have a CERT training program. CERT training and certification is recognized and accepted by all formal CERT programs nationwide. CERT trained volunteers from Palatine have relocated to other states and have become part of their new community's emergency management programs.

Data

Palatine sent three volunteers and the village's EMA Coordinator to the first Train-the-Trainer course offered in April of 2003 and immediately began to offer training afterwards. Initially the scheduling was ad hoc and training sessions would be conducted whenever they could get 10 or more participants. Anything less than 10 would not be enough to conduct the final exercise which is a requirement of the training.

Scheduling of the training became more formal in 2008. It is currently offered four times per year (once per quarter). Figure 1 is an example, and is the actual schedule for 2014. If there is insufficient registration (less than 10 students), the quarterly session is cancelled.

CERT Training January/February 2014		
Monday Jan 20	Preparedness	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Wednesday Jan 22	Organization	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Monday Jan 27	Search & Rescue	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Wednesday Jan 29	Medical part 1	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Monday Feb 3	Medical part 2	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Wednesday Feb 5	Fire Safety*	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Monday Feb 10	Psychology/Terrorism	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Wednesday Feb 12	Review/Final Exercise	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Monday Feb 17	PEMA Orientation	7:00 pm to 8:00 pm
CERT Training April/May 2014		
Tuesday Apr 15	Preparedness	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Thursday Apr 17	Organization	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Tuesday Apr 22	Search & Rescue	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Thursday Apr 24	Medical part 1	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Tuesday Apr 29	Medical part 2	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Thursday May 1	Fire Safety*	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Tuesday May 6	Psychology/Terrorism	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Thursday May 8	Review/ Final Exercise	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Tuesday May 13	PEMA Orientation	7:00 pm to 8:00 pm
"CERT Boot Camp" July 2014 (course covered over two Fridays/Saturdays)		
Friday Jul. 11	Preparedness/Psychology	6:00 pm to 10:00 pm
Saturday Jul. 12	Org/Medical part 1/Search & Rescue	8:00 am to 4:00 pm
Friday Jul. 18	Fire Safety* /Terrorism*	6:00 pm to 10:00 pm
Saturday Jul. 19	Medical part 2/Review/ Final Exercise	8:00 am to 4:00 pm
Tuesday Jul 22	PEMA Orientation	7:00 pm to 8:00 pm
CERT Training October/November 2014		
Monday Oct 20	Preparedness	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Wednesday Oct 22	Organization	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Monday Oct 27	Search & Rescue	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Wednesday Oct 29	Medical part 1	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Monday Nov 3	Medical part 2	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Wednesday Nov 5	Fire Safety*	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Monday Nov 10	Psychology/Terrorism	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Wednesday Nov 12	Review/ Final Exercise	6:30 pm to 9:30 pm
Monday Nov 17	PEMA Orientation	7:00 pm to 8:00 pm
* Training held at Palatine Fire Station 84		

Figure 1 - Palatine CERT 2014 Training Schedule

The training is broken down into nine modules (including a practical final exercise). Should a student miss any module, they can makeup that module at a future date either with Palatine's CERT program, or with another community's CERT program. However the student cannot participate in a final exercise until all the first eight modules are successfully completed. Since 2003, Palatine has conducted more than 54 CERT training sessions and has trained over 600 citizens (Smith & Leahy, 2014).

A current trend that has appeared is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit enough students to fill all four sessions in a year. Over the past five years, three winter sessions and one spring session were cancelled due to low enrollment. This is even with increased marketing efforts of the program. Feedback received seems to point to two areas. The first is what appears to be a decline in interest of citizens volunteering for programs such as this. The second seems to be the reluctance to take this training during the winter months. Discussion are in the works for future sessions to not to be scheduled during the winter timeframe thus reducing our offering to three times per year. We do, however, offer special scheduling of CERT to groups or organizations who can commit to 10 or more attendees. One example of this was CERT training for a couple of Boy Scout Troops along with their Scout Leaders.

PEMA currently has 10 trained volunteer instructors. These instructors come from various walks of life with different knowledge, education and experience. Several of Palatine's CERT Instructors, including myself, are now also part of the cadre for teaching the CERT Train-the-Trainer course for the State of Illinois.

PEMA instructors currently include five men and five women. They are technical/managerial professionals, retired/former medical personnel, retired/former military personnel, trainers from other business and industry, and current/retired teachers. The common

traits among all are the desire to volunteer, the love of teaching, and the belief in emergency preparedness. Their formal education spans from high school graduates to post-masters. Several are current or former education professionals.

The requirements to become a certified CERT instructor in Illinois include successful completion of a local CERT training program as a student, must be sponsored by an active status Citizen Corps program (e.g., PEMA), completion of FEMA independent study course [IS-265: Basic Instructional Skills](#), and finally completion of the Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) CERT Train-the-Trainer Course (“CERT Train-the-Trainer,” 2014).

Curriculum Changes

It was back in 1993 when FEMA decided to adopt the LAFD’s CERT concept and program available to communities nationwide. A number of changes to the program and curriculum were made over the years. The first major updates were made in 2005. These changes reflected standardization and introduced which topics in particular modules must be taught (e.g., all must learn about the Incident Command System) and those that are optional or non-applicable (e.g., hurricanes aren’t covered in Arizona). In 2011 a major update of the CERT program, to include the rewriting, reformatting and standardization of the training materials, updating to current concepts and procedures, and removing extraneous information and material was made.

Over the past 10 years, the number of modules and main subjects remain unchanged. Examples of updates or additions to the curriculum include current terminology, policies and procedures in the area of terrorism. There have been changes made in the area of disaster medical operations such as a standardized triage identification and hands-only cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). The changes made were done by committee. The National CERT Program

and the Individual and Community Preparedness Division in FEMA convened a focus group to review and update the CERT Basic Training material, and this group worked on it for two years. Members of this group included first responders (e.g., police, fire, EMS, search & rescue), emergency management personnel, and government officials at the federal, state and local levels from across the nation. Many lessons learned from various natural and man-made disasters played into the updates.

The current training materials are available to the public and can be found at <http://www.fema.gov/community-emergency-response-teams/training-materials>. One thing that is continuously authorized and encouraged at the local level is the customization of the materials used in the training. I had mention earlier about hurricanes are not covered in Arizona, or Illinois for that matter. However in Illinois we do get tornados. Our training materials are updated with factual information, stories and photographs of tornados recently experienced in Illinois instead of generic information. When in the terrorism module, we now refer to policies, procedures and CERT involvement in the Bank of America Chicago Marathon in wake of the Boston Marathon bombings. This brings the subject matter “closer to home” and more personal to the students.

Future

In the foreseeable future, the program will change somewhat. In PEMA’s CERT program students, volunteers and instructors will come and go. Local updates to the program will include relevant information and examples pertinent to our community and geographical area.

There appear to be no plans to change the local face-to-face delivery format of the nationally recognized CERT training. There is an independent study course offered by FEMA,

[IS-317: Introduction to CERT \(On-line\)](#), and it “can be taken by anyone interested in CERT.

However, to become a CERT volunteer, one must complete the classroom training offered by a local government agency such as the emergency management agency, fire or police department” (“Training Materials,” 2014). Some tactile things, like hand-on experience using a fire extinguisher against real fire, just can’t be done online.

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