

# About CERT

## Introduction

Following a major disaster, first responders who provide fire and medical services will not be able to meet the demand for these services. Factors as number of victims, communication failures, and road blockages will prevent people from accessing emergency services they have come to expect at a moment's notice through 911. People will have to rely on each other for help in order to meet their immediate life saving and life sustaining needs.

One also expects that under these kinds of conditions, family members, fellow employees, and neighbors will spontaneously try to help each other. This was the case following the Mexico City earthquake where untrained, spontaneous volunteers saved 800 people. However, 100 people lost their lives while attempting to save others. This is a high price to pay and is preventable through training.

If we can predict that emergency services will not meet immediate needs following a major disaster, especially if there is no warning as in an earthquake, and people will spontaneously volunteer, what can government do to prepare citizens for this eventuality?

First, present citizens the facts about what to expect following a major disaster in terms of immediate services. Second, give the message about their responsibility for mitigation and preparedness. Third, train them in needed life saving skills with emphasis on decision making skills, rescuer safety, and doing the greatest good for the greatest number. Fourth, organize teams so that they are an extension of first responder services offering immediate help to victims until professional services arrive.

## Background

The Community Emergency Response Team concept was developed and implemented by the Los Angeles City Fire Department (LAFD) in 1985. The Whittier Narrows earthquake in 1987 underscored the area-wide threat of a major disaster in California. Further, it confirmed the need for training civilians to meet their immediate needs. As a result, the LAFD created the Disaster Preparedness Division with the purpose of training citizens and private and government employees.

The training program that LAFD initiated makes good sense and furthers the process of citizens understanding their responsibility in preparing for disaster. It also increases their ability to safely help themselves, their family and their neighbors. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recognizes the importance of preparing citizens. The Emergency Management Institute (EMI) and the National Fire Academy adopted and expanded the CERT materials believing them applicable to all hazards.

The CERT course will benefit any citizen who takes it. This individual will be better prepared to respond to and cope with the aftermath of a disaster. Additionally, if a community wants to supplement its response capability after a disaster, civilians can be recruited and trained as neighborhood, business, and government teams that, in essence, will be auxiliary responders. These groups can provide immediate assistance to victims in their area, organize spontaneous volunteers who have not had the training, and collect disaster intelligence that will assist professional responders with prioritization and allocation of resources following a disaster. Since 1993 when this training was made available nationally by FEMA, communities in 28 States and Puerto Rico have conducted CERT training.

## Starting

We recommend a number of steps to start a CERT:

- Identify the program goals that CERT will meet and the resources available to conduct the program in your area.
- Gain approval from appointed and elected officials to use CERT as a means to prepare citizens to care for themselves during a disaster when services may not be adequate. This is an excellent opportunity for the government to be proactive in working with its constituency.
- Identify and recruit potential participants. Natural for CERT are community groups, business and industry workers, and local government workers.
- Train CERT instructor cadre.
- Conduct CERT sessions.
- Conduct refresher training and exercises with CERTs.

## Delivery

The CERT course is delivered in the community by a team of first responders who have the requisite knowledge and skills to instruct the sessions. It is suggested that the instructors complete a CERT Train-the-Trainer (TTT) conducted by their State Training Office for Emergency Management or the Emergency Management Institute in order to learn the training techniques that are used successfully by the LAFD.

The CERT training for community groups is usually delivered in 2 1/2 hour sessions, one evening a week over a 7 week period. The training consists of the following:

- Session I, DISASTER PREPAREDNESS: Addresses hazards to which people are vulnerable in their community. Materials cover actions that participants and their families take before, during, and after a disaster. As the session progresses, the instructor begins to explore an expanded response role for civilians in that they should begin to consider themselves disaster workers. Since they will want to help their family members and neighbors, this training can help them operate in a safe and appropriate manner. The CERT concept and organization are discussed as well as applicable laws governing volunteers in that jurisdiction.

- Session II, DISASTER FIRE SUPPRESSION: Briefly covers fire chemistry, hazardous materials, fire hazards, and fire suppression strategies. However, the thrust of this session is the safe use of fire extinguishers, sizing up the situation, controlling utilities, and extinguishing a small fire.
- Session III, DISASTER MEDICAL OPERATIONS PART I: Participants practice diagnosing and treating airway obstruction, bleeding, and shock by using simple triage and rapid treatment techniques.
- Session IV, DISASTER MEDICAL OPERATIONS, PART II: Covers evaluating patients by doing a head to toe assessment, establishing a medical treatment area, performing basic first aid, and practicing in a safe and sanitary manner.
- Session V, LIGHT SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATIONS: Participants learn about search and rescue planning, size-up, search techniques, rescue techniques, and most important, rescuer safety.
- Session VI, DISASTER PSYCHOLOGY AND TEAM ORGANIZATION: Covers signs and symptoms that might be experienced by the disaster victim and worker. It addresses CERT organization and management principles and the need for documentation.
- Session VII, COURSE REVIEW AND DISASTER SIMULATION: Participants review their answers from a take home examination. Finally, they practice the skills that they have learned during the previous six sessions in disaster activity. During each session participants are required to bring safety equipment (gloves, goggles, mask) and disaster supplies (bandages, flashlight, dressings) which will be used during the session. By doing this for each session, participants are building a disaster response kit of items that they will need during a disaster.

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## Maintaining Involvement

When participants have completed this training, it is important to keep them involved and practiced in their skills. Trainers should offer periodic refresher sessions to reinforce the basic training. CERT teams can sponsor events such as drills, picnics, neighborhood clean up, and disaster education fairs which will keep them involved and trained.

CERT members should receive recognition for completing their training. Communities may issue ID cards, vests, and helmets to graduates.

First responders need to be educated about the CERT and their value to the community. Using CERT as a component of the response system when there are exercises for potential disasters can reinforce this idea.

## **Resources**

FEMA supports CERT by conducting or sponsoring TTT's for members of the fire, medical, and emergency management community. The objectives of the TTT are to prepare attendees to promote this training in their community, conduct TTT's at their location, conduct training sessions for neighborhood, business and industry, and government groups, and organize teams with which first responders can interface following a major disaster.

## **Conclusion**

CERT is about readiness, people helping people, rescuer safety, and doing the greatest good for the greatest number. CERT is a positive and realistic approach to emergency and disaster situations where citizens will be initially on their own and their actions can make a difference. Through training, citizens can manage utilities and put out small fires; treat the three killers by opening airways, controlling bleeding, and treating for shock; provide basic medical aid; search for and rescue victims safely; and organize themselves and spontaneous volunteers to be effective

# Frequently Asked Questions

## Q: What is CERT?

**A:** 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. The [About CERT](#) section of this site gives you a complete description of CERT.

## Q: How does CERT benefit the community?

**A:** People who go through CERT training have a better understanding of the potential threats to their home, workplace and community and can take the right steps to lessen the effects of these hazards on themselves, their homes or workplace. If a disaster happens that overwhelms local response capability, CERT members can apply the training learned in the classroom and during exercises to give critical support to their family, loved ones, neighbors or associates in their immediate area until help arrives. When help does arrive, CERTs provide useful information to responders and support their efforts, as directed, at the disaster site. CERT members can also assist with non-emergency projects that improve the safety of the community. CERTs have been used to distribute and/or install smoke alarms, replace smoke alarm batteries in the home of elderly, distribute disaster education material, provide services at special events, such as parades, sporting events, concerts and more.

## Q: Is there a CERT near me?

**A:** Over 1100 communities and growing have listed their program on the CERT web site under the Directory of CERT Programs by State. You can check [the State Directory](#) to see if one is in your community. There also is a web site maintained by [Los Angeles City CERT](#) volunteers that has a listing of "Other Team Links".

## Q: How do we start a CERT program?

**A:** CERT requires a partnership between community members and local government, emergency management and response agencies. The program does take a commitment of time and resources from all parties. Interested community members should discuss with local government and emergency management officials ways to improve their community's preparedness capability and how they can be involved. The outcome of these discussions can range from education programs to an active training program like CERT that prepares participants to be part of the community's response

capability following major disasters. It is also important to develop a plan that covers training, maintenance and activation standards as well as administrative requirements like databases and funding. This plan will act as a guide so that one can evaluate the program and make adjustments.

## **Q: How is the CERT funded?**

**A:** Congress has provided funds through the Citizen Corps program to the States and Territories. Grants from these funds may be available to local communities to start CERT programs. Contact your [State Citizen Corps](#) point of contact to learn more about grant possibilities.

Also, there are a variety of local approaches to funding. Some communities build costs into their local budget while others charge participants to attend training to cover costs for instructors and course materials. In a few communities, CERT organizations have formed 501 (C) 3 for non-profit status to allow them to do fundraising and seek corporate donations.

## **Q: Why take the CERT training?**

**A:** Local government prepares for everyday emergencies. However, there can be an emergency or disaster that can overwhelm the community's immediate response capability. While adjacent jurisdictions, State and Federal resources can activate to help, there may be a delay for them getting to those who need them. The primary reason for CERT training is to give people the decision-making, organizational, and practical skills to offer immediate assistance to family members, neighbors, and associates while waiting for help. While people will respond to others in need without the training, the goal of the CERT program is to help people do so effectively and efficiently without placing themselves in unnecessary danger.

A success story about CERTs comes from events during the wildfires in Florida. The Edgewater CERT helped emergency management and the fire department personnel by assisting with evacuation; handling donations; preparing food for firefighters; and answering the phone while the professionals were fighting the fire. This is a great example of CERT members and response personnel working together for the benefit of the community.

## **Q: Who can take the training?**

**A:** Natural for the training are neighborhood watch, community organizations, communities of faith, school staff, workplace employees, scouting organization and other groups that come together regularly for a common purpose. CERT skills are useful in disaster and everyday life events.

## **Q: How do I take CERT training?**

**A:** To become a CERT member, you will have to take the CERT training from a sponsoring agency like an emergency management agency, fire department or police department in the area where you live or work. Contact the local emergency manager where you live or work and ask about the education and training opportunities available to you. Let this person know about your interest in CERT.

## **Q: What if I want to do more than just the basic training?**

**A:** CERT members can increase their knowledge and capability by attending classes provided by other community agencies on animal care, special needs concerns, donation management, community relations, shelter management, debris removal, utilities control, advanced first aid, Automatic External Defibrillator use, CPR skills, and others. The sponsoring agency should maintain records of this training and call upon CERT members when these additional skills are needed in the community.

CERT member also can use their skills to help the program flourish by volunteering to schedule events, produce a newsletter, perform administrative work, and take leadership positions.

## **Q: How do CERT members maintain their skills?**

**A:** CERT members and the local sponsoring agency work together to maintain team skills and the working partnership. It is suggested that the sponsor conduct refresher classes and an annual exercise where all CERT members are invited to participate. Some response agencies have conducted joint exercises with CERT teams and operate as they would during an actual disaster. The last point does bring up a lesson learned. Besides training CERT members, it is also important to educate members of response agencies in the community about CERTs, the skills that team members have learned during training and the role that they will have during a major disaster. One way to develop trust between CERT and responders is by encouraging agency personnel to participate in classes as instructors and coaches and in activities with CERT members.

Understanding that CERTs may operate independently following a disaster. CERTs can practice this independence by taking some responsibility for their own training. Teams can design activities and exercises for themselves and with other teams. Some members can be rescuers, some victims, and some evaluators. After the event, there can be a social so that community teams can discuss the exercise and get to know each other.

## **Q: Can someone under age 18 participate?**

**A:** This is a local decision. Someone under 18 should be with a parent or have permission to attend. Some communities have reached out specifically to young people. Winter Springs High School in Florida offers the training to high school students. You can read [an article about this](#). CERT is a great way to address the community service requirements for high school students and provides students with useful skills. CERT also fits nicely with training given to Boy and Girl Scouts and the Civil Air patrol.

## **Q: What if I have concerns about my age or physical ability?**

**A:** There are many jobs within a CERT for someone who wants to be involved and help. Following a disaster, CERT members are needed for documentation, comforting others, logistics, etc. Non-disaster related team activities may include keeping databases, developing a website, writing a newsletter, planning activities, helping with special events and organizing exercises and activities.

During CERT classroom training, if one has a concern about doing a skill like lifting, just let the instructor know. You can learn from watching. We would like everyone who wants to go through the training to have an opportunity to participate and learn the skills. CERT educates participants about local hazards and trains them in skills that are useful during disaster and life's everyday emergencies.

## **Q: What about liability?**

**A:** The text of the Volunteer Protection Act of 1997 is [available for viewing](#). Also there is information about [State Liability Laws](#) located on the Citizen Corps website. During training, each sponsoring agency should brief its CERT members about their responsibilities as a CERT member and volunteer. Finally, there is [a job aid on liability](#) for you to review in our Start a CERT Program section.

The CERT material was developed by the Los Angeles City Fire Department and adopted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in 1993. The CERT manual contains basic and straightforward material that has been accepted by those using it as the standard for training.

It is important to remember that the best sources of help in emergencies are professional responders. However, in situations when they are not immediately available, people will want to act and help. We have seen this time and again in our history. CERT training teaches skills that people can use to safely help while waiting for responders. The alternate is to do nothing and that is not in our nature.



# Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Program

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» [Homeland Security Helps Train Citizens For Emergencies With \\$19 Million For Community Emergency Response Teams](#)

The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program helps train people to be better prepared to respond to emergency situations in their communities. When emergencies occur, CERT members can give critical support to first responders, provide immediate assistance to victims, and organize spontaneous volunteers at a disaster site. CERT members can also help with non-emergency projects that help improve the safety of the community.

The CERT concept was developed and implemented by the Los Angeles City Fire Department in 1985. FEMA made this training available nationally in 1993. Since this time, CERT programs have been established in more than 340 communities in 45 states.

The CERT training program is a 20-hour course, typically delivered over a seven-week period. Training sessions cover disaster preparedness, disaster fire suppression, basic disaster medical operations, light search and rescue, and team operations. The training also includes a disaster simulation in which participants practice skills that they learned throughout the course. The CERT course is taught in the community by a trained team of first responders who have completed a CERT Train-the-Trainer course conducted by their state training office for emergency management, or FEMA's Emergency Management Institute, located in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

Over the next two years, the CERT program aims to double the number of participants, with over 400,000 individuals completing the 20 plus hours of training. Train-the-Trainer sessions are being held in all 56 states and territories over the next year to expand the program throughout the United States.

In FY 2003, FEMA will provide over \$19 million in grant funds to states and territories to be used to expand the CERT program through additional state-offered Train-the-Trainer courses as well as to help communities start CERT programs and expand existing teams.

The FY 2003 grant money is in addition to \$17 million distributed through the FY 2002 supplemental appropriation.

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 members to reinforce the basic training and to keep participants involved and practiced in their skills.

CERT is a vital component of Citizen Corps, President Bush's community-based initiative to engage citizens in homeland security and community and family preparedness through public education and outreach, training opportunities, and volunteer service.

#### CERT Programs Across the U.S.

Over 300 communities have listed their program on the CERT web site under the Directory of CERT Programs by state. To see if one is in your state or community, visit [training.fema.gov/emiweb/CERT/dir.asp](http://training.fema.gov/emiweb/CERT/dir.asp).

CERT groups have been formed in communities, at businesses and even in schools. For example, in Marysville, WA, the Marysville Middle School Student Emergency Response Team (SERT) members learn first aid, CPR, earthquake awareness and responses so that they are prepared to help the American Red Cross that will set up their headquarters at MMS in event of an emergency. In addition, SERT members help in the accounting for students and staff during fire and earthquake drills.

#### Olathe CERT Members Join Johnson County Volunteer Effort

Several CERT groups in the Kansas City, Ks., area were involved in debris removal efforts following the devastating tornadoes that touched down in the area on May 4, 2003. CERT volunteers joined volunteers from Olathe Firefighters, Olathe FD Explorer post, the Civil Air Patrol, HAM Radio Operators, team members and spontaneous citizen volunteers to help neighbors through a coordinated, massive clean up effort.

Initiated by Olathe Fire Captain Bill Schneider, volunteers headed to two sites on Saturday, May 10. While their primary focus was in providing debris removal and clean up assistance, many CERT training topics were teaching points during this recovery effort, including team organization, disaster psychology, and medical support.