COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS GO A LONG WAY TOWARD PREPARING CITIZENS FOR DISASTERS OF ALL TYPES. By Demetrius A. Kastros
All good advice, but what the national message lacks is an emphasis on the need for every family to have solid emergency skills training — something they can get from a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training course.

CERT training teaches emergency first-aid, basic rescue techniques, how to assess a building to determine if it’s safe to enter, basic firefighting, disaster psychology, securing utilities, operating with a team and neighborhood search. CERT-trained citizens learn to work with other CERT members to form a team, go into their neighborhood after a disaster and “do the most good for the most people.”

The basic CERT curriculum is available to anyone. Among the many things the federal government does well is provide a well-designed, easy-to-access curriculum for instructing CERT classes in your community. Lesson plans, videos, and PowerPoint slides are all available for easy download at no charge on the Citizen Corps website, www.citizencorps.gov/cert.

Developing an effective CERT program in a community involves more than simply instructing classes. The initial curriculum takes about 25 to 30 hours and is merely the foundation upon which a CERT Community must be built. Student enthusiasm begins with making the class worth a participant’s time. Minimize classroom lectures — CERT is about learning hands-on emergency skills.

Because CERT is a team concept, here in Monterey, Calif., we initially form the students into five-member teams. The teams select their own team leaders for each skill practice, such as splinting and bandaging, and rotate the leader position for each segment. Everyone takes turns being a victim and rescuer. A critical disaster function and role for CERT members is to assemble, assess their neighborhood and proceed as a team to perform safe actions without any help or initial support from traditional first responders, such as the fire department. Beginning their basic training with a sense of team operations greatly supports this primary function.

CERT members should be taught to use materials they find in an average home; clean linens, diapers, sanitary napkins, and a host of other household items make excellent dressings and bandages for wounds. Cardboard boxes can be quickly fashioned into a splint. Blankets can be an effective stretcher to move the injured. Materials in a backyard fence, such as pieces of lumber, make good prying tools to remove debris around a trapped person. A roll of duct tape has countless uses, including securing a splint or reinforcing cracked windows.

CERT skills are essential for family members to learn, even if they never venture outside their neighborhood to help others.

Once your solid foundation of ongoing basic training is established, you now can build on this foundation to establish your CERT Community. Quarterly drills are very effective in maintaining member skills, enthusiasm and participation. Make these drills realistic and minimize classroom instruction. Monthly email newsletters, Facebook pages and a website are effective, low-cost methods for disseminating new information and maintaining contact. Setting up a website should be neither complicated nor expensive. There’s usually someone in your membership who has the skills to set these things up for your program. In addition, most IT departments in a city or county can provide this setup service.

The Monterey CERT is organized into nine zones or team areas throughout the community. Each zone has a storage container that is solidly anchored to a foundation in the ground. These are somewhat similar in size to a larger, portable, on-demand metal storage container. Basic inventories include: first-aid supplies, hand tools, pry bars, fire extinguishers, body bags, tarps, generators, stretcher boards (backboards), ropes, yellow isolation tape, water, portable sanitary facilities and a host of other equipment. These storage caches provide an excellent supplement to teams working on extended incidents, examples of which seem to pepper the nightly news (tornadoes in the Midwest, for instance).

Each zone has team members from the surrounding neighborhoods. Teams select their own leaders and those leaders have keys to access the storage containers, thus enhancing the independent nature of CERT. The containers also typically

**STARTING A CERT**

**HAVE A KIT, MAKE A PLAN, STAY INFORMED.**
A Monterey CERT trains on removing a victim from beneath rubble using only common lumber.

serve as the neighborhood staging area for team members during an emergency.

Under the city disaster plan, one critical role for Monterey CERT members is initial damage assessment reports immediately after an emergency occurs. These reports are made directly from the CERT zones to the city EOC. Since CERT members live in the neighborhoods, we are ideally suited to this reporting role. Critical to this function is a VHF radio system consisting of handheld radios that are supported by three base stations. The radio system is just now being updated to comply with FCC narrowband requirements. This radio system is a simplex or line-of-sight system that does not rely on automatic repeaters to boost signals, such as are common to police and fire departments’ radio systems. Because the handheld radios are battery operated, they remain unaffected by the common maladies of a disaster such as power outages and cellphone interruptions. These handheld radios operate with a proprietary battery or AA battery packs. All three CERT base station radios, one of which is in the EOC, are located in buildings with back-up generators. The base radios are all staffed by CERT members to provide continuity with teams in the field.

This radio system allows for more than damage assessment reports. It enables the EOC to remain in direct contact with the various neighborhoods across town, getting constant updates on conditions. The radios also allow efficient tracking of CERT members operating in an area, and they enable teams in the field to instantly request professional assistance, such as from the local fire department, for a situation beyond the role of the CERT. Always remember at every phase of CERT training that an important component of your program must be safety awareness and instructing members not only about what they can attempt to do, but more importantly, what their limits should be.

If cellphone systems remain operational after an emergency, an effective method for the EOC to assess community conditions is to establish a simple email address to which CERT members in the field can send pictures of damaged buildings from their cellphones and mobile devices.

Another essential component of your CERT Community is the ability to contact your team members rapidly, giving them instructions on what the needs are following an occurrence. Not all disasters or community emergencies are as obvious
Monterey CERTs were activated during the March 2011 tsunami alert following the Japan earthquake. In this instance, after activating the EOC, city officials decided it would be prudent to post personnel in safe areas to warn citizens to remain clear of the beaches.

Monterey uses a commercially available service, E-Sponder, to mass-call city personnel. E-Sponder is an Internet-based system that lets anyone with access codes send a message from an Internet-capable computer. The sender accesses the service, types a message on the screen similar to an email, and then sends that message to a predesignated group stored in the system. The typed message is instantly voice digitized and received by the designated person via a recorded voice message. The messages can be sent to land lines or cellphones, and the recipients simultaneously receive the same message in text and email format. The system can store multiple subgroups such as EOC personnel, fire department members, CERT members, etc. The sender can transmit an all-call message or select subgroups for notification. Hundreds of personnel can be contacted through the calling system at once.

During the West Coast tsunami alert, Monterey CERT members were directed to a single staging area using E-Sponder. At 5:00 that morning within 30 minutes, we fielded a group larger than twice the size of the on-duty fire department. Teams were then organized, given a radio and sent to seven locations above the shorelines. Team members gave tsunami warnings to dozens of unknowing people who were approaching the beaches. Using the CERT radio system, close contact among the teams in the field was maintained. Members were kept advised of the estimated arrival time of the tidal surge. The Monterey Marina rose three feet at the anticipated time, but there was no significant damage. Santa Cruz, Calif., is 15 miles across the bay from Monterey. A visible tsunami hit the small Santa Cruz harbor, causing $25 million in damage to moorings and boats. This from an earthquake that occurred 5,000 miles away.

Our CERT members know that if all forms of communication fail during a disaster, they presume that a call-out of CERT members occurred and report to their neighborhood staging area to assemble as a team. CERT members are taught to care for their family and immediate neighbors first, and then report to staging. Members are discouraged from conducting independent actions beyond their immediate family and neighbors.

Monterey CERT instruction is done entirely by volunteers. We receive minimal funding from the city for trade-mark helmets and vests. Some money is also provided for training tools and equipment. A separate 501(c) nonprofit group obtains charitable donations that can be transferred to the program.

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