

CERT: Building teams of citizen emergency responders benefits communities

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struction and hands-on exercises created in 1988 by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

CERT is comprised of unpaid volunteers willing to assist their own – and neighboring – communities when there aren't enough professional responders to go around.

It's a game-changer in a major disaster, especially in small towns where police, fire and medical teams face staffing shortages. Instead of pleading with voters for ever-larger disaster response budgets, a community can develop volunteer CERT teams from trained citizens.

The CERT philosophy fits in nicely with Warrenton's plans. When the City Commission set goals for the 2017-18 fiscal year, disaster preparedness was high on the list.

"The CERT team is very important for Warrenton and any community," Police Chief Matt Workman said. "The bottom line is that everybody knows what we have for resources for the police and fire. If we have a disaster, they're going to be way overtaxed."

Many team members buy their own specialized equipment "kits" and handheld two-way radios. And the federal government offers funding grants for CERT teams connected with local city or county governments.

Kimber Townsend, program director for Polk County CERT, and her team of four instructors sprinkled in practical tips while sharing their own experiences as early responders to local crises. Some of these disasters were so extensive that area agencies – overwhelmed by demands from everywhere at once -- could not arrive until hours later.

Often first on the scene, CERT members are ready to assess and alleviate the most

life-threatening conditions known as the "three killers:" breathing, bleeding and shock.

A victim's tongue might be blocking her airway. A child could be spurting blood. Another might be in shock from internal injury.

While addressing injuries, team members attach colored bracelets to victims indicating medical severity: green for the "walking wounded," yellow for those likely to survive with later treatment, red for those in urgent need of a medical professional.

While radio calls are made to report the red "immediates," team members respectfully tag and cover the dead.

Victims who are able and willing are recruited to help

while CERT continues its sweep through the neighborhood. All who can walk would go street by street, house by house, documenting and mapping disaster conditions for when professional crews can roll in over the damaged, blocked and busy roads.

Clatsop County's CERT includes small teams in Astoria, Warrenton, Gearhart, Seaside and Cannon Beach.

Some are connected to local police, others with fire departments comprised of volunteers prepared for times more normal than The Big One.

Nationwide, 70 percent of the teams work with local police, who generally welcome disaster response volunteers – especially when they

come trained and partially self-funded.

Warrenton's CERT is a half dozen strong and preparing for Cascadia subduction zone earthquakes, which have a 50 percent chance of striking in the next 20 years with enough force to devastate whole areas and overwhelm local services for weeks.

Warrenton's CERT, unofficially sponsored by Workman, meets at City Hall bimonthly.

Members have helped police during nonemergencies, handling crowds at the Fourth of July and Autism Color Run and assisting with traffic during the Buoy 10 fishing season.

"Just getting the baseline training and having that

knowledge will provide dividends in the end for our community," Workman said.

FEMA refers to CERT as its Citizen Corps.

CERT teams are "not just for the worst disasters, but in all disasters," said Vince Aarts, Clatsop County Emergency Management coordinator. "Your neighbors are your best option and might even be the first responders."

In our next major disaster, you might require a skilled pro to treat your wounds after the event.

But it might very well be a CERT team member who saves your life.

For more information about CERT, go to cert-info@thecolumbiapress.net.


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