

## Community Emergency Response Team

In January 2002, President George W. Bush issued a challenge to all American citizens in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 – be prepared, be proactive, do something. Many Henrico County citizens have taken this challenge to heart by becoming more involved in their communities. Since the beginning of the first Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) class in January 2003, more than 75 citizens involved in some aspects of their lives with Henrico County have met this challenge.

### **CERT History**

The concept of CERT was born within the Los Angeles, CA fire department in 1985. LAFD took a trip to an area near Kobe, Japan to study emergency response plans and found extremely close-knit groups of people. These groups, consisting of family, friends, and neighbors, had plans to help each other in times of disaster. Specifically, these people were ready for earthquakes and knew what to do in order to secure utilities, extinguish small fires, and handle other tasks early in a disaster. This preparatory action would allow the first responder program that was in place, specifically fire, EMS, and police, to respond to the larger assignments and tasks of a disaster. These teams were organized not only in the family environment, but also in the workplace, and could be found in almost every office building throughout the area. Instead of simply allowing citizens to take care of their own problems, the local governments helped arrange training to teach the citizens how to prepare for and react in case of a disaster. These citizen teams did not serve as a replacement for the career safety providers – they simply augmented the system.

While assisting with search and rescue efforts after a devastating earthquake in Mexico City in 1985, the same LAFD firefighters saw emergent volunteers doing the same tasks that the citizens in Kobe did. The difference in this case was that these volunteers were not trained in proper techniques of debris removal, scene safety, and provider safety. Although these emergent volunteers did an excellent job of saving over 800 people from the debris, over 100 of them died from injuries received from collapsing buildings, falling debris, and other scene hazards.



LAFD took the information gathered at the disaster scene in Mexico City and the lessons learned in Japan and developed a program targeted to train citizens. One of the main goals of this training was to teach the “average” citizen how to take care of

themselves, their families, neighbors, and co-workers in the time period immediately following a disaster when local fire, police, and EMS resources will be overwhelmed. The Community Emergency Response Team program initially was designed for earthquake preparedness, but quickly expanded to an all-hazards program and included information on wildfire safety and medical care. In 1995, the Federal Emergency Management Agency became involved in further development of the program and brought CERT to the national level. Under the FEMA program, citizens are trained in:

- Preparing for a disaster
- Sizing up a disaster scene for hazards
- Securing utilities including electricity and water
- Triage and basic first aid
- Small fire suppression and fire prevention
- Basic search & rescue techniques
- Logistics management
- Documentation

### **CERT in Henrico County**

The first Richmond area CERT train-the-trainer class was offered in August of 2002 through the Virginia Department of Emergency Management. Anna McRay, a long-time volunteer with Henrico County EMS, took the class and contacted Captain Mike Cox, of the Henrico Division of Fire, about the availability of a CERT program in the Richmond area. At that time there was no such entity in the Metro Richmond area and Captain Cox welcomed the idea. His efforts in gaining support from the Henrico Division of Fire command staff and Mrs. McRay's willingness to put a program together have ushered in a new phase of emergency preparedness in the County. Although there are currently more than 40 CERT programs throughout the Commonwealth, Henrico County was the first in the Richmond Metro Area to develop the program.



Through the combined efforts of the County of Henrico Divisions of Fire and Police, the County's first CERT class began on January 24, 2003. These ten members of an area neighborhood watch group represented a diverse cross section of Henrico County. The academy consisted of stay-at-home moms, community leaders, college students, college professors, and instructors of different disciplines. These 10 students graduated on March 8, 2003 equipped with the knowledge and the skills to make a difference in their communities and workplaces. Since that time there have been six additional CERT classes

completed, bringing the total number of trained citizens in Henrico County to 73. There are now three established CERT teams in the County, Wyndham CERT, Olde Springfield CERT, and Dorset Woods CERT. Additionally, there are two Business Emergency Response Teams – People’s Bank of Virginia and Dominion Power (Innsbrook). Several recent graduates also work at Virginia Center Commons and the Virginia Department of Health. The entire CERT program exists solely on grant funding through the Office of Domestic Preparedness, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Virginia Department of Emergency management. There are currently no County funds earmarked for this program. Any additional work, instruction, or materials are obtained through volunteers in the program or are donated by local businesses.

Henrico County Citizens Emergency Response Team (HCCERT) has further developed the FEMA training standards to more closely reflect the standards in place for local fire and EMS agencies. This includes:

- Replacing the FEMA triage, a three-color triage program, with the START triage program which is used across the Commonwealth;
- An overview of Henrico County’s incident command system;
- An introduction to the police department’s efforts during a disaster to include crime prevention, and
- A tour of the communications center to allow students to see what really happens during a “normal” shift and allows them to imagine how easily a system can become overwhelmed during a disaster.

Students in the HCCERT program enjoy a variety of speakers and instructors



throughout their training. All instructors are well-versed in their topics and have either completed a basic CERT training class, completed the CERT train the trainer program through VDEM, or are current DCJS instructors through the police and sheriff’s office, or have training in their specific speaking topics.

Instructors and speakers include:

- A representative from the National Weather Service Weather Office in Wakefield , VA to speak on weather disasters and preparedness;
- A former CERT student and current Henrico Fire volunteer to speak on fire prevention and suppression;

- Firefighters with knowledge of proper search and rescue techniques;
- A current nationally registered paramedic speaking on START triage and basic first aid;
- State health department nurses speaking on public health issues after a disaster;
- Speakers with hands-on experience with the County incident command system and documentation requirements, and
- A speaker from an area pastoral service with disaster psychology background and field experience in disaster situations.

Training and continuing education classes are also offered after the basic CERT class. This includes classes on first aid, CPR, SKYWarn storm spotter classes, and the opportunity to practice skills through drills and exercises. HCCERT is also working to develop chainsaw safety classes, shelter management classes, and team/volunteer management classes to help with retention of members and increase what CERT volunteers can do for the County in times of crisis. There are also numerous opportunities for HCCERT volunteers to participate in community outreach efforts by attending various fairs, expos, and community days to

spread the word about the CERT program and participate in recruitment efforts.



HCCERT is also working to help Henrico County become the first Storm Ready community in Central Virginia, and the second county with this designation in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This includes offering more weather preparedness classes for the community, distribution of weather alert radios,

and the use of technology already in place to disseminate weather warning information in a timely and efficient manner.

### **How HCCERT Integrates with Current Resources**

Throughout their training HCCERT volunteers are reminded that their main goal is to ensure their families, friends, and co-workers are ready for a disaster BEFORE one ever happens. CERT members are repeatedly trained on what to do during a disaster – but much attention is focused on what NOT to do. However, when the inevitable disaster strikes, they are responsible for their own families, homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces. All CERT and BERT (Business Emergency Response Team) teams are self-activated, meaning that no call to activation comes from the County in the time period immediately



after a disaster event as a fire, police, or EMS call for service would be. However, these teams can be activated by a call to the CERT Program Coordinator to get HCCERT volunteers to assist during the disaster recovery period, usually 24 – 36 hours after the disaster has passed. Tasks that HCCERT can assist with include water and food distribution, answering public telephone inquiries in an EOC or hotline area, and assisting with staffing at shelters. In fact, these volunteers are only limited by what they are NOT asked to do in times of disaster. These people are dedicated to keeping emergency services available to those who truly need help in a disaster situation and work hard to supplement the existing fire, EMS, and police structure.

During a disaster safety green helmets and vests emblazoned with HENRICO CERT easily identify members. These safety items are issued to each member who has completed the basic CERT training program. There is an effort underway to further identify these members through use of a color-coded badge system, similar to what the County currently has in place for volunteers.

HCCERT members can also be used in non-disaster related events also. Since the program's inception, HCCERT has helped staff first aid tents at K95's CountryFest (July 2003), staff the first aid station at the Virginia State Fair (September 2003), and participated in numerous community events and outings. In these situations, HCCERT volunteers can help with patient registration and tracking, assist with equipment logistics, and provide a friendly hand to patients during stressful times.

### **HCCERT Accomplishments**

The Henrico CERT program has been the premier CERT program not only in the Metro Richmond area, but has been recognized on the state and federal level as well. HCCERT was the first CERT program in the Richmond area and has served as a model for other jurisdictions including King William County and Goochland County. HCCERT is also the first CERT program in the region to include animal safety in disasters as part of the mandatory CERT training program.



HCCERT is working in conjunction with Chesterfield and Goochland Counties to develop a regional CERT program. This regional approach will allow the jurisdictions to share instructors, equipment, and training facilities to bring CERT to a standardized regional level.

In 2003, the Virginia Department of Emergency Management recognized HCCERT as an outstanding program, and the program coordinator was one of two people selected to represent Virginia at the FEMA/EMI CERT training program in Emmetsburg, MD. Program

Coordinator Anna McRay has served on the National Trainer Policy Development Board, sponsored through LAFD, since the board's inception in 2003. This group is working to develop national training standards for instructors and programs to make the entire CERT program a true nationwide program that can be used in any jurisdiction. Mrs. McRay, who recently received her BA with Honors in Emergency Services Management from the University of Richmond, also serves as an adjunct faculty member with the Virginia Department of Emergency Management. She helps to train CERT instructors around the Commonwealth using many examples of the exemplary emergency services programs in Henrico County.



The true test of preparedness and recognition came in the aftermath of Isabel in September 2003. CERT teams were able to secure their neighborhoods, assist with removing debris and opening roadways into their neighborhoods, and securing household utilities. HCCERT volunteers were then called upon to help at water distribution points, assist with answering the Hurricane Hotline for County residents, and assist with telephones at the FEMA disaster field office on Shrader Road. These tasks showed the members that they could do more than what they learned in class and still help the County tremendously. Their combined efforts resulted in 800 hours of donated time.

## **CONCLUSION**

Henrico Community Emergency Response Teams are intended to augment the current public safety entities in Henrico County. The CERT program also serves as a pool of resources for other volunteer opportunities in the County, including the volunteer rescue squad system, volunteer firefighters, and volunteers for the police department. Through continuous training and focus, these volunteers will be able to support the current Henrico County public safety system by increasing preparedness and making communities more disaster resilient.

## **CERT RESOURCES**

FEMA CERT web site: <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/CERT/>

Citizen Corps web site: <http://www.citizencorps.gov/>

Virginia Corps web site: <http://www.virginiacorps.org/>

**HCCERT**

