

CERT Competitive Events Expand Appeal and Engage Volunteers

CERT competitive events are becoming increasingly popular for CERT volunteers to showcase their skills and take part in additional training. Organizers of CERT competitive events across the country are building upon existing platforms to expand the appeal of CERT programs to wider audiences and increase the knowledge, training, and experience of participating volunteers. CERT programs are hard at work organizing events that get them noticed in local communities and make CERT training fun and engaging for participants and observers alike.

The Mississippi State Advisory Council, led by State CERT Program Manager Dave Nichols, hosted Mississippi's 15th CERT Olympics on June 20-22, 2014. Mississippi State University hosted the three-day event with over 100 participants. Ten CERT teams consisting of 10 people each from throughout the state took part in the event. In addition to the spirit of friendly competition, the Olympics featured morning training sessions in several areas including triage, setting up a treatment area, fire safety, and building search and clearing. The afternoon portion included skill stations which tested the team's abilities and knowledge on the same topics as the training sessions. Organizers introduced two activities for the first time this year, an outdoor grid search and hazmat awareness, both of which were well-received by participants. The private sector also supported the event. Each year local businesses across Mississippi contribute to the event by donating food, volunteers, and supplies for the sessions. Mr. Nichols explained that the CERT Olympics is one of several avenues for the state to collaborate with private and public stakeholders outside of the CERT program. Mr. Nichols added that CERT competitive events are one way they maintain and build 'buy-in' for the CERT program from the private sector, different levels of government, and CERT volunteers themselves. Efforts like the CERT Olympics have significantly boosted the visibility of the CERT program in Mississippi, catching the attention of the ranking U.S. Senator, Mr. Thad Cochran, who attended the State Advisory Council meeting in August of 2014.



The 15th Annual Mississippi CERT Olympics was held on June 20-22, 2014.

Event organizers built the road to Mississippi's success by providing incentives to participants. The only expense to the teams was their own transportation costs; the state picked up the rest of the tab, including housing and meals. Planners used social media and fliers to promote the event to local CERT teams, and several local newspapers and television stations interviewed Mr. Nichols about the event. Mr. Nichols stressed the point that events such as the CERT Olympics help keep citizen volunteers trained and engaged, and he thanked the Mississippi Department of

Homeland Security for funding the CERT Olympics and Mississippi State University for providing food, resources, and volunteers to plan and execute the event. He also said that, if asked for advice on how to make such an event a success, he would suggest other CERT competitive event organizers try to make participating in the event as easy as possible, keep the training and skill segments challenging, and use additional volunteers as patients to make the activities seem as realistic as possible.

While the Mississippi Olympics are well-established, many programs across the country are organizing their first competitive events. One such event is the Northern Nevada CERT Rodeo, where first-time organizers Stacey Belt (Carson City, Nevada), Ronna Hubbard (Douglas County, Nevada), Shirlee Rhodes (Washoe County, Nevada), and Betsy Hambleton (Washoe County, Nevada) conducted a one-day CERT Rodeo. The Northern Nevada Regional CERT Rodeo consisted of eight teams of six to eight people from around the region, including tribal teams. The event began with a brief safety message and introductions before moving into the



The Northern Nevada CERT Rodeo participants learn new skills in the Fire Extinguishing station.

competition phase, which included five different stations, each timed for 15 minutes. The stations included: basic team building with a hazmat scenario; fire suppression; interior search; triage; and establishing a command structure. Participants expressed particular interest in the interior search and triage components of the event.

Event organizers stated that utilizing a more hands-on approach, with an emphasis on practicing and improving skills, enhances the value of the experience for participants. And to keep

things fun, Carson City Fire Chief Gioni and Douglas County Fire Chief Carlini acted as the chefs for the day and whipped up a delicious lunch for participants. Thanks to funding support from Nevada Department of Emergency Management, volunteers were able to be moulaged, making the triage testing station at the CERT Rodeo more realistic than previous drills.

Ms. Belt added that when planning a rodeo, it is important to keep in mind that the event should be as much a learning experience as a friendly competition. Time constraints can affect scheduling, getting all the material covered in one day can be a challenge, and travel times for the participants must be taken into account. Providing 15 minutes at the end of each session for the evaluator to offer feedback to the participants is also important, as is allowing time for the specific requirements and activities in each of the stations. For participating teams, the

opportunity to meet and work with different CERT volunteers from across northern Nevada built stronger bonds across programs. Having a network of friends within the CERT system reinvigorated volunteers to continue with the participation with the program and to improve upon their skillset with training.

The event hosted by the Kansas City Regional CERT Sub-Committee in October 2013 wasn't their first rodeo! The Kansas City CERT Rodeo was held at Park University for CERT teams across the region. Park University donated the space to hold the Rodeo and volunteers to staff the event, and the University's President kicked off the day's activities with opening remarks. Approximately 10 teams participated in the rodeo, with a total of 127 participants. The participants applied what they learned during morning training sessions to competitive, more hand-on activities in the afternoon. Organizers received very positive feedback, with participants remarking on the quality of the classes and the friendly competition.



Kansas City Regional CERT Rodeo teams participated in hands-on training sessions.

As with any event, the Kansas City Regional CERT Rodeo did face some challenges. Ms. Jennifer Fales of the Kansas City Office of Emergency Management and Mr. Michael O'Neal with the Platte County Sheriff's Department and Emergency Management co-chaired the event. They pointed out several factors to keep in mind when planning a Rodeo. Establishing a planning committee with all desired partners on board is the most important. Once the planning committee is established, developing a planning timeline is crucial, and sticking to the established timeline is essential. Addressing the time and effort required to plan and execute a successful rodeo, Ms. Fales commented, "It seems daunting, but once you dive in and start doing it, and see how appreciative your CERT volunteers are, it really is worth your time."

In addition to planning the rodeo events, the planning team also decided to develop a rodeo tool, called CERT Rodeo in a Box, to assist other programs across the country in planning similar events. The CERT Rodeo in a Box is an excellent resource for CERT coordinators to involve their teams in fun, hands-on, applicable training at low cost. CERT Rodeo in a Box includes a manual with lessons learned on how to set up a CERT Rodeo, covering such topics as: how to establish the budget; logistics considerations; and an after action review. The training portion of the CERT Rodeo in a Box is comprised of the following seven advanced mini-course videos, professionally filmed and edited, on subjects useful for CERT volunteers:

- Damage assessment
- Decision making/problem solving
- Grid searching
- Knot tying 101

- Preparedness on a budget
- The art of moulage
- Working with individuals with functional and access need.

The videos are also available with closed captioning to make them more accessible. A resource for coordinators interested in planning their own competitive event, organizers can utilize CERT Rodeo in a Box as a tool to help them elevate awareness of CERT programs and further educate new volunteers. The CERT Rodeo in a Box manual and training videos are currently available on www.PrepareMetroKC.org.

Whether the approach is a three-day CERT Olympics, a one-day CERT Rodeo, or a CERT Rodeo in a Box, CERT program managers are using a combination of established activities, new approaches, and new tools to create unique events for CERT programs. As a result, the feedback from CERT programs that have participated in these events has been positive, and most have said that they feel more engaged in their programs and are eager to further their training and expand their skill sets. In addition, organizers state that CERT competitive events result in the added benefit of developing skills and relationships that CERT volunteers can use in service to their communities.

If you are interested in organizing your own CERT competitive event, we encourage you to explore the resources developed by the Kansas City Metropolitan Emergency Manager's Committee. FEMA has also developed materials to help CERT programs plan, organize, and conduct their own competitive events, drills, and exercises. These resources are available at <http://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/27997>. Take a look today!