

Montgomery County (MD) CERT Brings Social Media to Emergency Operations

The spread of social media has greatly influenced the way people stay connected—including during emergencies. The web-savvy Montgomery County, Maryland CERT program recently identified new ways to leverage online social networks, including Facebook and Twitter, to enhance communication within their local Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and between CERT volunteers.

Social media offers several distinct advantages over e-mail communication. Social media status updates provide CERT volunteers with an outlet for sharing non-emergency information, reserving email for urgent messages. In addition, social media sites allow users to upload multiple photo files, which teams can easily share without the need for and challenges associated with large e-mail attachments. CERT volunteers can also take photos of the same location at different times of day to document the improvement or deterioration of conditions in a specific area, helping CERT volunteers more precisely convey what is happening around them.

To help with internal communications, the Montgomery County CERT recently launched a closed, invitation-only Facebook group to engage CERT members. “Leveraging technology has been a tremendous hit for Montgomery County to get more people involved,” said Steve Peterson, Montgomery County CERT President. During a storm, even if the team does not activate, members can help keep the entire group updated through situation reports that include location, weather and road conditions, as well as any other relevant information.

CERT-managed social media efforts provide support directly to emergency management personnel and a local EOC. For example, the Montgomery County CERT social media coordinator previously supported the Montgomery County EOC during a weather event by monitoring social media networks for news. Meanwhile, EOC managers work with CERT social media coordinators to obtain updates from members in particular zip codes to enhance their disaster response efforts.

To ensure the CERT social media coordinators deliver effective and insightful updates to other CERT members and EOC personnel, Peterson suggests that CERT program managers provide social media training to supplement the core CERT curriculum. Peterson stressed the importance of preparing members to monitor social media by providing training, such as FEMA’s IS-042 *Social Media in Emergency Management* course (available at <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/courseOverview.aspx?code=is-42>).

“If you have someone in there that is the greatest [CERT] volunteer...but [who] doesn’t know how to turn a computer on, when they go into the EOC to provide social media monitoring, then they’re [unable to provide] the value brought by that initiative,” Peterson said. “This is the way of the future; things are not going to change. This [social media] is here to stay and we have to make adjustments.”

A banner used by Montgomery County CERT to promote their social media monitoring capabilities.

