

## **25 Years After Loma Prieta, Bay Area CERT Partners Ensure Residents Are Ready for the Next Earthquake**

On October 17, 1989, as the San Francisco Giants prepared to host their cross-bay rival Oakland A's in Game 3 of the 1989 World Series, a powerful 6.9 magnitude earthquake struck Northern California, causing 63 deaths and nearly 4,000 injuries in the Bay Area. Twenty-five years later, many groups across the Golden State are working to ensure the lessons learned in the aftermath of Loma Prieta will help minimize loss of life, injuries, and property damage from any future earthquakes.

In 1990, less than a year after Loma Prieta, the San Francisco Fire Department, prompted by the city's residents, formed the [Neighborhood Emergency Response Team \(NERT\)](#) Training Program. One of the signature legacies of the quake, NERT – modeled after the Los Angeles Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) – has since trained more than 25,000 San Franciscans in basic emergency response. “With basic training, we feel NERT volunteers can really make a difference in the lives of their families and neighbors when the next disaster strikes,” said Lt. Erica Arteseros, the NERT Program Coordinator for the past decade.

That same year across the bay in Oakland, the city's fire department wanted to ensure its community became stronger and more resilient in the wake of Loma Prieta. To that end, the department established the [CORE \(Communities of Oakland Respond to Emergencies\) Program](#), which is also a certified CERT Program. Like NERT, CORE has become an integral part of the emergency response community in and around Oakland, explained Dena Gunning, the CORE Emergency Planning Coordinator with the Oakland Fire Department.

The CORE Program trains an average of 2,500 Oakland residents annually. While nearly identical to the traditional CERT curriculum, CORE is organized slightly differently. There are three training sessions: [CORE I](#) – Home and Family Preparedness; [CORE II](#) – Neighborhood Preparedness and Response; and [CORE III](#) – A, B, C and Hands-On Skills. Participants can take one or all of the training components, Gunning explained. Oakland firefighters teach CORE I and II classes. CORE Program graduates that complete all three sessions receive a hard hat, CORE vest, and a certificate of completion. CORE III program graduates are sworn in as Disaster Service Workers (DSWs) and receive a CORE ID badge that is valid for two years. The State of California created the [Disaster Service Worker Volunteer Program](#) (DSWVP) to provide workers' compensation benefits to registered DSW volunteers who are injured while participating in authorized disaster-related activities.

In the 10 years since Lt. Arteseros took over NERT, she says the program has added 1,000 to 1,500 new trainees each year, but she worries about what she described as “extreme complacency” that has crept into the city since Loma Prieta. “There are 800,000 people that live in San Francisco, and yet only 1,000 or so getting trained annually,” she said. “We are never going to get everyone, but I am always looking for ways to increase our reach.”

Gunning sees that same complacency creeping into her city as well, and says that organizers need to find ways to increase their numbers while ensuring existing graduates remain up to date on the latest techniques. The CORE Program encourages graduates to attend a refresher course or participate in the [CORE annual citywide exercise](#). Doing so every two years allows them to maintain an active CORE membership and Disaster Service Worker status. Gunning says,

“Maintaining awareness of the importance of being prepared is always going to be a challenge.” Gunning added, “It takes a constant effort to encourage residents of the need to prepare. When an event such as the recent Napa quake occurs, the number [of residents who sign up for CERT trainings] increases immediately.”



Volunteers check in for the CORE 2014 Annual Citywide Emergency Response Exercise on April 16, 2014

Gunning is constantly looking for ways to increase CORE’s reach, including adding CORE I and II classes in Spanish and Chinese. “[We] would like to see the CORE program represented in all neighborhoods. Currently, the program is not well-represented in some of the inner city and high crime areas of the city,” Gunning explained. “2015 will be the 10th annual CORE Citywide Exercise. Over the next five years, we plan to increase the number of CORE trained neighborhood groups to include every Council district and resident, throughout the city,” she added.

Like her counterpart in San Francisco, Gunning is always looking to bring the preparedness message to larger groups across the city, especially traditionally underserved communities. “Oakland is a very diverse city and currently the CORE program does not truly reflect the diversity of the city,” she said. “The more affluent areas of the city are well represented, but all areas of the city need to be equally represented,” Gunning added.

To meet this challenge, CORE developed what it calls the “[Learn, Lead, Lift](#)” program, which is a picture-based, fear-free preparedness training focusing on the emergency preparedness needs of the whole community citywide. This program, Gunning explained, engages community- and faith-based organizations in becoming the neighborhood leaders by being trained in “Learn, Lead, Lift” techniques and “paying it forward to the constituents they serve” by targeting communities where low-income, limited education, and other social limiting factors make it difficult to think about preparedness.

Similarly, a key part of the NERT program, Lt. Arteseros says, is spreading the word about the program. “People don’t know about us without word of mouth,” she said. “We don’t have a

marketing budget, but we are out on the streets educating people every single day, and we send our volunteers to street festivals around the city,” Arteseros added.

Gunning agreed, saying that CORE conducts CORE I and II non-public classes in Oakland neighborhoods for groups of 12 or more participants. “This allows neighborhood groups to take CORE training in their own neighborhoods and go on from there to organize CORE sponsored neighborhood groups,” she explained.

As to be expected from a tech-savvy community like San Francisco, NERT has partnered with a local start-up, [Next Door](#), to increase the awareness of NERT and preparedness in and across the city. The free private social network platform for neighborhood communities allows neighbors and local agencies, including fire stations, to target communications. “If I have a class in the Mission District, I can post to people who I know live there instead of just posting to Facebook. I



Volunteers staff the NERT booth at a preparedness event.

know I am targeting people who live in, and are engaged in, a particular neighborhood,” Arteseros said. “This tool is being rolled out across the country and it will be powerful,” she added.

CORE, meanwhile, participates in numerous outreach events at locations like churches, senior centers, housing complexes, and health and safety fairs. Gunning said it works best when they work with community members to

promote the program and emphasize the importance of being prepared. Battalion Chief Lisa Baker, the CORE program Operations Coordinator, agrees. “Having pamphlets that show the diversity of the program, having pamphlets available in other languages, having members of the Oakland Fire Department give brief talks about CORE at home owner association meetings will broaden the exposure of CORE,” Chief Baker said.

In her never-ending drive to increase participation and enrollment in San Francisco, Lt. Arteseros has her own advice to other departments nationwide that might be looking to start a CERT program. “Partnerships are important,” she said. “It starts at the top. You need to get your leadership behind you and when leadership is dynamic, the community will follow.”

Gunning echoed those sentiments. “We are in the process of reaching more (residents) in the underserved areas by using fire stations as well as faith based organizations as venues for

outreach,” she said. “If the people won’t come to CORE we will bring the CORE Program to them!”

While earthquake preparedness and increasing the numbers of trained volunteers remains a top priority for NERT and CORE, both groups understood the importance of looking back and remembering the importance of the Loma Prieta quake. To mark the anniversary, NERT participated in the Exploratorium museum’s free community preparedness exhibition, providing an opportunity for NERT volunteers, including ham radio operators and cargo bicycle designers, to share their ideas, creativity, and resourcefulness with their neighbors.

Across the bay, Oakland’s CORE Program held a commemorative event at the Cypress Freeway Memorial Park to mark the solemn anniversary. The event, “Reflect, Honor, Prepare,” brought elected officials, city staff, and heroes from the quake together to honor those who lost and risked their lives a quarter century ago. After the ceremony, CORE hosted an Emergency Preparedness Fair with hands-on activities, fire truck and emergency equipment displays, interactive demonstrations, and earthquake preparedness items for community members, including more than 300 local school children.

For more information on earthquake preparedness, log on to [www.ready.gov/prepare](http://www.ready.gov/prepare).

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