

Despite the Distance, U.S. Atlantic Territories' CERT Programs Prevail

Responding to a disaster is difficult in any situation, but when you are roughly 1,100 miles off the Atlantic coast of Florida these difficulties can often be magnified. Their remote locations and the frequency of severe weather, especially strong hurricanes and devastating floods, pose significant challenges for the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

Thankfully for both of these U.S. Territories, there are strong CERT programs in place and thriving on the islands. After returning from a recent trip to Puerto Rico, Claire Thomas, the FEMA's Community Preparedness Officer (CPO) for Region II, praised the territory's CERT program for being extremely active. Puerto Rico has more than 100 trainers and 18,000 residents trained in CERT. "They are getting creative with their preparedness messaging, driving across municipalities with first responders, playing music out the back of pickup trucks, and hundreds of volunteers handing out preparedness information," she said. "It was so inspiring to see the time and energy CERT volunteers were dedicating to help make their communities more resilient."

CERT is also going strong in the U.S. Virgin Islands. "The Virgin Islands CERT program has continued to grow over the past few years, with schools regularly teaching Teen CERT during school hours and adult CERT programs being taught at the community and company level," said Thomas, shortly after returning to the mainland.

Recently, the Virgin Islands CERT program received its first set of CERT trailers, through FEMA grant funds and with technical support from New Jersey Office of Emergency Management (NJOEM). Irvin Mason, the CERT Training Coordinator for the U.S. Virgin Islands, called the trailers, which are stocked with equipment to help with disaster response, "great recruiting tools." Mason praised the support of Howard Butt, the CERT Coordinator with NJOEM, saying he and his staff were heavily involved in bringing the trailers to the islands. "Howie was great. He was very instrumental, he provided so much support," Mason explained. "Now, people see these trailers in a parking lot with the CERT logo, and it is a great conversation starter about CERT."

Mason has been working hard to bolster the territory's Teen CERT program in recent years. He works closely with the Junior ROTC programs in the schools, and has trained nearly 600 high school students in the last five



CERT Volunteers in the Virgin Islands receive hands on training.

years. On the last day of training at a school, CERT conducts a drill, and parents are invited to come so the students can highlight what they have learned. “Hopefully, they then bring those lessons home with them,” Mason said. “Each training graduate receives a certificate and ID that allows them into an actual EOC, which makes them feel that they are part of the system.”

With more trainings scheduled in the coming weeks, Mason looks forward to adding to the rolls of trained students. “The schools down here really push this,” he said. “They really want their students trained so they know what to do in case it takes responders a while to get to an affected

area. Our goal is to do a training every year in all of the high schools here.”



CERT Volunteers gather for training in Puerto Rico.

Both programs face unique challenges beyond simply their geographic isolation from the mainland United States. In Puerto Rico, for example, Rachel Murphy from the Puerto Rico Emergency Management Agency (PREMA) said that it can be a challenge to get the commitment from mayors to

support the CERT program, and she said that the language barriers sometime pose challenges for potential volunteers to complete courses and trainings.

“The teams I met were very active in Puerto Rico, with volunteer liaisons and instructors creating and leading their own initiatives,” Thomas said. “But they are looking to expand their knowledge, in particular how to work with limited resources and how to engage private companies to start CERT.”

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, Mason noted that getting equipment to the islands can be a challenge, as can be the limited number of certified trainers. Like Puerto Rico, Mason has turned to the private sector to help meet the challenges he faces, noting that hotels in St. Thomas have CERT teams based in their hotels. “We have a big push with churches and companies, like Home Depot, on the island,” Mason said. “We’re a small community; everyone looks out for each other. They understand that it’s a benefit to them to be educated.”

According to Mason, the other big challenge is complacency from a populace that may have grown immune to the hurricane threat. “Say the word ‘hurricane,’ and people will prepare for that in a minute, they think they know what to do,” Mason said. “But complacency sets in with the number of hurricanes we face down here. All you can do is educate the people.”

To that end, Mason does a hurricane expo every year, involving every agency that is involved in emergency response. “We do our best to keep the public informed as much as possible,” he

added. “Ultimately, we know that the islands have to sustain themselves. We live in the tropics. We know anything can happen, and neighbors look out for neighbors here.”

In Puerto Rico, the CERT Program organizers like to organize large-scale events, including “Hurricane Tours,” to get out the word. In November, Puerto Rico hosted the CERT Great Fair at the Municipality of Hatillo. “The best way to keep the volunteers committed is to invite them to activities at the municipal and state levels, including workshops, trainings, and exercises,” said Murphy. “We visit shopping malls, churches, schools, and universities to promote and disseminate program information; however, the best campaign is on radio and television.”

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