

New CERT Team Gains Experience in Polar Vortex Emergency

Only established in 2013 and still in its infancy, the Putnam County CERT team has quickly made a name for itself by providing invaluable services to the West Central Indiana residents it serves. During a polar vortex event in January 2014, the Putnam County Emergency Management Agency (EMA) put the team on standby given a historically dangerous blast of arctic air bearing down on the nation's midsection. Officially activated on January 4, the team assisted with transportation and various other missions for nearly five full days.

When health care professionals could not make it into their hospital because of the snowy frigid conditions, Putnam County CERT volunteers assisted in transporting these employees to and from work. Additionally, volunteers opened and managed shelters for county residents who lost electricity and heat in the sub-zero temperatures; assisted stranded motorists; and provided communications support to the county's Emergency Operations Center.

Patrick Quillin, the Putnam County CERT commander, said his young team grew tremendously from this activation, noting that many of lessons learned apply to other CERT programs across the country as well as the public at large. Commander Quillin's five key points:

1. The public is not always aware of the emergency services available to them and may not know how to access them. By the time they need these services, it is often too late to raise widespread awareness.
2. In an emergency, make sure to have backup power for items like cell phones. Being unable to communicate directly can make it more difficult to access emergency services.
3. Ensure information sent to emergency management is concise, specific, and accurate. When passed through multiple sources, information is often conveyed differently than initially intended. Start with specific points.
4. It is important to have sufficient staff at the Emergency Operations Center to properly deal with all of the issues that can arise during a disaster.
5. Understand that people treat their pets like family, and you may need to provide shelter and transportation for animals.

Putnam County CERT attributes much of its success to the experienced, skilled volunteers on its team which include dentists, pilots, former government employees, and former police and fire personnel. This large group of skilled members bodes well for later recruitment, since younger members will be able to learn from the more seasoned members.

"The best advice I can give anybody is to exercise, practice, and train," said Quillin, offering some final recommendations to other new CERT programs. "And when you get that done, start it over again and again and again."

For more information, please contact Patrick Quillin at csi@ienddeavor.com.

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