

New Lenox CERT Helps Village of New Lenox Become a “Safe Community”

Many communities across the nation have disaster preparedness programs in place to help residents learn how to respond to emergencies and stay safe. Some of these communities have even received recognition from national preparedness organizations for their efforts. One such community is New Lenox, Illinois, which was designated as a “Safe Community” in 2010 by the National Safety Council (NSC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborating Centre on Community Safety Promotion. New Lenox received this distinction thanks, in part, to the creation of a local Community Emergency Response Team (CERT).

The “Safe Community” accreditation is awarded to communities demonstrating leadership in promoting safety, reducing injuries and preparing their citizens for disasters through partnerships with community sectors such as fire departments, park districts, and healthcare. During a two-day assessment, communities are evaluated on their success in meeting six program requirements, including collecting data regarding the number and causes of injuries sustained by residents in the community and creating sustainable disaster preparedness programs.

After 10 years of rising injury rates in the community, the Mayor of New Lenox sought designation as a “Safe Community” as a way to drive new initiatives to help reduce injuries, including those caused by weather emergencies. He asked Daniel Martin, Public Safety Chief of the New Lenox Police Department, to identify potential disaster preparedness programs for the community that would help them to meet the requirements for becoming a “Safe Community.”

Having heard about CERT from the Will County Emergency Management Agency, Martin identified the program as a good fit for the Village of New Lenox because they would be able to provide the CERT basic training in its entirety to any of New Lenox’s community members, regardless of their previous experience or background. And offering a common training curriculum to everyone would mean that all participants complete the class with the same understanding of basic emergency preparedness and response principles. Martin hosted a village meeting to gauge the community’s interest in establishing a CERT program, and after receiving a strong positive response, he created the New Lenox CERT in 2009.

In just a short time CERT went from an unknown entity in New Lenox to one which was widely recognized and fully integrated into the community. In fact, Martin says 90 percent of the CERT’s

activities involve community outreach. Since its inception, New Lenox CERT has partnered with the local fire department, park district, and other community stakeholders to teach cardiopulmonary



New Lenox CERT volunteers participate in a triage/treatment exercise during the 2014 Prairie State CERT Challenge, a competitive CERT event organized by the Illinois Emergency Management Agency.

resuscitation (CPR) classes, host health and safety exhibitions, and distribute preparedness kits throughout the community. CERT volunteers also use local fish fries, 5k races, and outdoor concerts as opportunities to engage with the public and share preparedness information. The New Lenox CERT program has also established several committees (Public Information, Emergency Preparedness, Shelter Management, and Access and Functional Needs) devoted to making the community safer.

During the “Safe Community” assessment period, the NSC and the WHO Collaborating Centre on Community Safety recognized the Village of New Lenox for its commitment to preparing the community for disasters through strategic partnerships and the creation of more than 16 disaster preparedness programs. Through CERT, the Village of New Lenox was able to demonstrate how they prepare citizens for emergencies and disasters. As a result, NSC and WHO Collaborating Centre on Community Safety designated the Village of New Lenox as a “Safe Community,” an honor it currently shares with fewer than thirty other communities in the United States.

Since receiving the accreditation the Village has become safer and more resilient. For example, Martin says that according to information collected from preparedness surveys passed out during the local health and safety exhibitions, more New Lenox residents have developed family emergency plans and assembled disaster supply kits, and many residents now have NOAA radios.

But perhaps the most noticeable result of the “Safe Community” accreditation for the Village of New Lenox has been the reduction in injuries and health care costs. After receiving the honor, the Village saw a two-year decline in injury hospitalizations. A study from the NSC showed that nearly 300



New Lenox CERT volunteers support the New Lenox School District Fun Fair at Liberty Junior High. These students are playing games available at Ready.gov.

hospitalizations may have been prevented, saving the community more than \$14 million in health care costs. Martin attributes this success, in part, to the commitment of New Lenox CERT volunteers in preparing the community for disasters.

For CERT programs interested in getting more involved in local preparedness efforts, Martin advises program managers to sit down with local leaders and discuss ideas about how the CERT can benefit the community. For example, organizing or taking part in safety exhibitions helps to keep volunteers active and engaged

with residents. The added visibility from participating in community events also increases awareness of and support for CERT among the public and local leaders, and helps to integrate the program into the community.

To learn more about the Safe Community program, including how your community can achieve this designation, please visit: <http://www.nsc.org/learn/NSC-Initiatives/Pages/safe-communities.aspx>.