

CERT Responds to Deadly Building Collapse in New York City

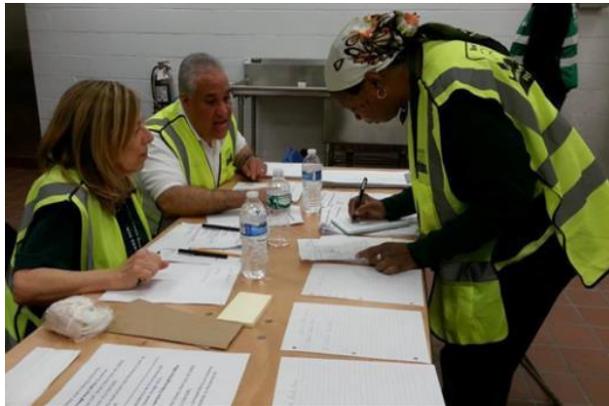
When an explosion caused by a gas leak leveled two buildings in East Harlem in March 2014, the New York City Community Emergency Response Team (NYC CERT) mobilized and deployed to the site fewer than two hours after the initial 9-1-1 call.

During the 12 days following the blast, which killed eight people and injured dozens more, 87 CERT volunteers representing 24 teams from across the city—including many from the impacted East Harlem neighborhood—were on call around the clock to assist both emergency management officials and those impacted by the collapse.

After authorities determined that the scene was safe and suitable for CERT activation, NYC Emergency Management notified CERT via its “Send Word Now” system, which uses a cascade approach to call, email, and text recipients on a distribution list.

The East Harlem building collapse marked the first time NYC Emergency Management used Send Word Now to mobilize CERT in response to a real-life incident. Once the activation notification went out, Manhattan 11 CERT was able to deploy to the incident site and assist with traffic duties quickly.

In the immediate aftermath of the explosion and subsequent activation, CERT volunteers reported to a nearby school to help staff and set up a Resident Service Center, which stayed open for 12 days. CERT volunteers primarily assisted with managing the reception area and intake of residents, providing language translation services in Spanish, Chinese, French, and Japanese, and escorting people with the police to retrieve belongings from more than 100 apartment units. Demand for CERT volunteer services was especially high during the first 48 hours of the incident as displaced residents arrived at the Service Center. NYC Emergency Management assigned CERT volunteers, many of whom returned daily to help their fellow New Yorkers to perform tasks to address each day’s anticipated needs.



NYC CERT volunteers staffing the registration table during the East Harlem building collapse.

Maya Milanytch, NYC Emergency Management’s CERT Program Manager, worked with the CERT volunteers for three days at the Resident Service Center after the incident. “[The center] would have been so much more challenging to run if we hadn’t had such a dedicated and motivated group of volunteers,” she said.

Milanytch explained that a number of the repeat volunteers actually lived in the impacted area, which helped build a trust and comfort level between residents and the volunteers. NYC CERT consists of over 50 teams across all five of the city’s boroughs. Volunteers take part in an intensive training program. The basic training program for new CERT volunteers lasts 10 weeks and is based on the national training model developed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). However, in addition to the basic CERT curriculum, NYC CERT classes include units to help volunteers address the unique challenges they could encounter in an urban environment. These units include High Rise Building

and Utility Emergencies, Public Transportation, and Building Community Disaster Networks. NYC CERT also trains its volunteers to provide psychological first aid and to support Resident Service Centers—training that was particularly useful after the East Harlem building collapse.

Following the incident, NYC Emergency Management worked to supplement the Resident Service Center training based on CERT volunteers' experiences. Revisions focused on the roles CERT volunteers can and should perform and included an overview of the operational planning cycle.



NYC CERT honored volunteers from Manhattan 11 CERT, the first team on scene, and other teams from across the city at an April 10, 2014 recognition ceremony.

Milanytch says that NYC Emergency Management learned a few key lessons from the East Harlem building collapse. First, ensuring CERT volunteers have a full understanding of agency roles and responsibilities at emergency incidents allows the volunteers to work effectively with all response partners. During the response to this incident, she said, knowing what each response agency was tasked to do would have been helpful for the CERT volunteers. Milanytch's second takeaway was the need for additional training for staffing Resident Service Centers. After CERT volunteers successfully staffed the Center last March, NYC Emergency Management wanted to build on this momentum and offer supplemental training to CERT volunteers who did not activate in response to the East Harlem building collapse. NYC Emergency Management hosted the first course this past October as part of an exercise held at the City's FDNY training facility.

Milanytch also identified a few additional considerations essential to any successful CERT activation. Clear, concise communication is perhaps the most important factor for CERT activation in any type of response. NYC Emergency Management had open lines of communication with CERT leadership and other responding agencies during response efforts. As a result, CERT leadership was able to communicate effectively with CERT volunteers.

On Thursday, April 10, 2014, NYC Emergency management hosted an event in East Harlem to recognize the CERT volunteers who responded to the building collapse and convey the gratitude of NYC Emergency Management and the greater East Harlem community for their service. Former NYC Emergency Management Commissioner Joseph F. Bruno joined NYPD Captain Thomas Harnisch, Commanding Officer of the 25th Precinct, FDNY Battalion Chief James Brosi, and a representative from the City Council Speaker's Office to honor the 87 CERT volunteers who assisted first responders and survivors following the East Harlem building explosion. "CERT members were an invaluable partner to first responders following the building collapse and a great help to the East Harlem community," said Former Commissioner Bruno. "Their selfless volunteerism embodies the ideals of the CERT program to protect and serve the community in its time of need."