

Nashua CERT Responds to Thanksgiving Day Activation

In November 2014, a winter storm caught seasoned New Englanders in Nashua, New Hampshire off guard. Nashua residents awoke on Thanksgiving Day to an intense storm that had dumped more than 10 inches of heavy, wet snow, which knocked down power lines and toppled trees across the city, forcing nearly a third of Nashua residents to start their holiday in the dark.

In response to the Granite State's fourth largest power outage in history, Nashua's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) activated the city's Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). OEM sent a code red message to its CERT distribution list of 100 volunteers and 30 responded to the alert, even though it was Thanksgiving. Of the 30 volunteers who responded, OEM activated 10 and placed 20 on stand-by. "This storm's timing made it difficult to ask for help; no one had power and it was Thanksgiving Day," said Emily Martuscello, OEM's Program Manager, noting that the first volunteers were in the field within an hour of receiving the code red message.

In the initial hours of the response, OEM's primary need was for the CERT volunteers to conduct damage assessments of downed power lines, fallen trees, and unplowed roads. Volunteers paired up and deployed across the city's more than 30 square miles, helping OEM to better direct resources to areas in need while identifying additional priority streets and areas in need of assistance. "This was the first real test of the call back procedures and the team had never been on standby before," Martuscello said. "This was the first time the CERT team had been activated for a real live weather event without notice."

Volunteers conducted damage assessments for 60 sites across all four quadrants of the city in less than five hours. CERT leveraged the City of Nashua's GIS enhanced mapping capabilities, which allowed volunteers to capture information with their smart phones in the field and directly update the system.

"We were prepared for the storm and when the activation request came we were ready to help. We were able to provide real time information to the EOC and reduce the burden on city resources," said resident Kathy Hersh, who along with her husband, Larry, is a volunteer with Nashua CERT.

Later that evening, OEM sent an additional code red alert seeking CERT volunteers to staff a shelter in Nashua to support overworked and overwhelmed Nashua OEM and public works staff, making CERT volunteers an integral part of the city's emergency response. CERT volunteers were personally invested in their work because they were patrolling areas that



CERT volunteers set up a shelter for those residents who lost power during the storm.

were close to home, often times their own neighborhoods, explained Justin Kates, City of Nashua Director of Emergency Management. “This incident displayed the best test of the process – in real time – and it was successful,” Kates said, adding that he expects he will activate CERT again in the future.

Fortuitously, the City of Nashua participated in the Canada-U.S. Enhanced Resiliency Experiment (CAUSE) about a month before the Thanksgiving storm. Designed to test the ability of cross-border information sharing in the event of an emergency or natural disaster, the exercises included Nashua CERT volunteers who learned important skills in collecting information using a multitude of social media and GIS tools. CERT volunteers were able to put these skills and tools they learned during CAUSE into action during their Thanksgiving deployment, said Martuscello. “It really shows the importance of exercises and training and the need to be ready to go into battle,” she added.

The response to the CERT deployment was very positive from other city departments as well as the CERT volunteers, Martuscello said, adding that other city officials praised the CERT volunteers for their critical role executing the damage assessments. The storm overextended local emergency responders’ regular response duties, so having the CERT volunteers assist was especially helpful, Martuscello said.

As a result of an after action report, the City of Nashua plans to make more training available to CERT volunteers, and expand training capabilities in shelter operations. As for recommendations to other programs that may be facing the same weather challenges this winter, Martuscello and Kates agreed that the most important step is making sure programs keep their call down roster up to date. Kates offered one other piece of advice: “Make sure the CERT members have their emergency plans all squared away and [have ensured that] their family members are secure before they go out.”