

### **CERT Vital for Small Georgia Community**

Geographic location and landscape can make it difficult for emergency services to quickly reach rural or isolated areas. As such, many remote communities partner with local departments and agencies, officials, and organizations, including volunteer groups, to help residents learn how to care for themselves and for others after an emergency until professional responders can arrive. When a local community's professional services are of limited size, scope, and capability, self-sufficiency becomes even more important.

One community that takes preparing its residents very seriously is Folkston, Georgia, which is the seat of Charlton County. Charlton County is a primarily rural area in the southeast corner of the state and is 75 miles long, although its population is less than 15,000, and is located in the heart of thousands of commercial timber acres. In recent years, several wildfires have struck the area and adjacent counties due to severe drought, consuming nearly one million acres of land. Lumber is the county's main industry and wildfires threaten not only lives, but also livelihoods.

The threat of wildfire is a constant concern for residents, particularly because Folkston, which has a population of over 4,000, has no hospital or full-time professional fire department, and the nearest neighboring community is nearly 25 miles away. Folkston once had a hospital, but it closed in 2013 due to financial difficulties. Currently, the city relies solely on local emergency medical services, three ambulances, and a volunteer fire department to serve its residents.

Recognizing the risks associated with limited emergency response capabilities combined with the threat posed by wildfires, Charlton County identified the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program as a good fit for their communities. Because of the limited professional responder services throughout the large, sparsely-populated rural county, local citizens may be on their own for relatively long periods of time in the event of an emergency. Providing training to members of the community helps them to care for themselves and their neighbors until the arrival of professional responders, mitigating gaps in communities' professional emergency services. "They don't have a lot of resources at their fingertips," says Charlton County CERT Administrative Coordinator MeLisa Phillips, "They have to rely on each other if something happens. They have to be able to help each other."

Charlton partnered with nearby CERT programs in Camden County and Peachtree City to begin offering its first CERT trainings in 2013, including the basic and train-the-trainer courses. But Charlton County CERT was only getting started. To further increase the capacity of their volunteers, they forged partnerships with EMS, fire departments, and even the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge to make additional emergency preparedness and response courses available. For example, the Charlton County fire department offers an advanced medical training course, Emergency Medical Responders (EMR). The course is one of several that are required for volunteer firefighters. The county also works with the wildlife refuge to provide classroom-based Incident Command System (ICS) and National Incident Management System (NIMS) training to help CERT volunteers work more effectively in teams and in support of professional responders.

Charlton County has prioritized providing CERT training to Charlton County employees, and set a goal of training all county and city employees. “After a disaster [and evacuation], county and city employees are the first to return. If they are trained in CERT and the first to return, then they are the first to help the community recover. Having that CERT background will help officials manage the city,” said Phillips. Thirty city and county employees have already completed the basic CERT training, approximately one third of the workforce of the city and county. “The response has been great,” says Phillips. “They enjoy the class and like that it’s hands-on and practical.”

Phillips said that the program was very fortunate to have almost immediate buy-in from local government officials. “Leadership did not need much convincing,” she said. “The first class was full of local leadership wanting to see the program take off.” Several officials, including the former County Commissioner and the Charlton County Emergency Management Agency (EMA) Director, were already familiar with the program from attending previous FEMA-sponsored CERT trainings at the Emergency Management Institute (EMI). Phillips indicated that the closure of the hospital, which increased the importance of neighbors being able to help one another, also encouraged leadership to support the program.

For rural communities looking to start a CERT program, Phillips encourages community members to get leadership involved early and to find one or two key people to champion CERT, even though this may require some persistence. “Always go in and approach somebody. Keep reaching out until you find someone who will listen. Give them a chance to hear what the program is about and what can happen with it,” she said. “Be diligent and consistent about CERT -- when people see what CERT is, they’re more likely to realize its importance.” And when it comes to resources, Phillips says that sometimes it’s just about asking: “In our community, we have been blessed with the classes that we’ve been able to offer and take part in just from asking.”



Charlton County CERT volunteers participate in a fire extinguisher exercise.