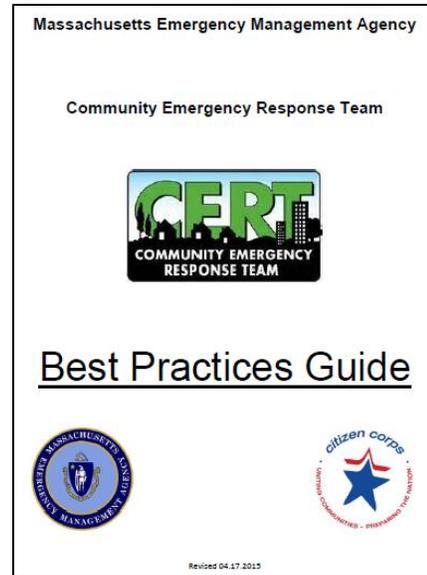


## **Massachusetts Creates Best Practices Guide for Local CERT Programs**

David Cramer, the Citizen Corps and Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Program Coordinator for the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), has been busy lately as the number of registered Massachusetts CERT programs has grown from 85 to 126 over the past 18 months. But while these programs serve a wide variety of communities, many of them face similar challenges, including issues related to funding and liability. Working together with MEMA's Citizen Corps Council and local programs throughout the Commonwealth, Cramer has developed a [Best Practices Guide](#) to address these common challenges and help local Massachusetts communities start and maintain successful CERT programs.

The guide includes recommendations on starting and maintaining a CERT program, developing standard operating procedures and guidelines, activation and deployment, volunteers and liability, marketing CERT, specialized training, working with neighboring programs, and more. It also features examples of guidelines and tools that communities throughout Massachusetts use to manage their programs. This includes sample standard operating guidelines, consent forms, press releases, certificates, and other policies and procedures. There are also links to a variety of online resources.



Cramer began developing the guide in July 2013 after development of a guide was identified as a priority by both MEMA's Director and its Citizen Corps Program Council. After reviewing existing CERT guidance available through FEMA, he felt it was necessary to develop a single resource that was more concise and spoke to the specific needs, priorities, and contexts of communities in Massachusetts. Cramer started by reaching out to other nearby states that had developed guides of their own, including Vermont, Connecticut, Maine, and New Hampshire. After speaking with each of his counterparts in these states and reviewing copies of their guides, he began to compile the first draft.

Once he had a working version, Cramer circulated it to CERT programs throughout the Commonwealth for their feedback. He asked that local communities also share with him how they address their bigger CERT-related policy questions, such as liability-related issues, keeping volunteers engaged, and resource development. The current best practices guide includes several examples of and links to local CERT guides and resources, along with contact information if readers want to follow up with those local programs for additional details. Cramer indicated that his own experiences as a local CERT program manager in Mansfield, MA were also helpful in developing the guide.

Cramer also conducted a survey that asked all Massachusetts CERT, Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), and Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) programs (the most prevalent Citizen Corps partner programs in the Commonwealth) to share information about training programs for volunteers, liability, funding sources,

workers' compensation, and other issues. Eighty percent of the programs in Massachusetts participated in the survey. Cramer incorporated responses into the best practices guide, and said that the survey was met with positive feedback from participating programs: "They want someone to ask for their input because it makes them feel part of the program."

MEMA unveiled the first version of the *Best Practices Guide* at its annual statewide emergency management conference in May 2014. Since then, the guide has undergone several revisions. Cramer describes the guide as a "living document" that any organization can use and one which can be updated when necessary. In April 2015, MEMA updated it to include two new sections: one on training courses available through MEMA and another on CERT Competitive Events. Both sections are intended to provide options and ideas for keeping CERT volunteers engaged, and for maintaining and further developing their skills.

The *Best Practices Guide* takes information that CERT programs may not have previously had access to and makes it easy to find and readily available. Cramer said that as a result, it has increased CERT programs' awareness of available resources. For example, prior to the publication of the guide, many programs were still paying for basic training participant manuals because they were unaware that they could order them for free from FEMA. Several programs also previously assumed that MEMA was the only potential source of funding for their programs when in fact "there are many organizations in local communities that CERTs should talk to," said Cramer, including local businesses like Home Depot and Lowe's. "They all have emergency programs that are willing to help local volunteer programs."

The guide has benefitted local programs in a variety of other ways as well. For example, some programs have used the content in the liability section to go back to their municipal leaders and successfully convince them to cover CERT volunteers under the municipality's insurance policy. Individuals interested in starting CERT programs also indicate that the guide makes it easier to discuss starting a program with local officials and emergency managers. When someone calls and asks how to start a CERT program, he directs them to the guide and they tell him "this is exactly what I was looking for!"

The *Best Practices Guide* has also strengthened MEMA's relationship with CERT programs in Massachusetts and made it easier for Cramer to serve the rapidly increasing number of them more effectively and efficiently. Cramer receives a high volume of questions related to a wide variety of issues. More often than not, he is able to direct programs to specific sections of the guide, while still making himself available to respond to follow up questions or requests for additional information.

Cramer has several recommendations for other states that may be interested in creating their own guide. He suggests that guides be concise and easy to read, and that their content be tailored to the needs, priorities, challenges, and hazards of their local communities. What he said was most important, however, is seeking input from local CERT programs and working with them to find out what information and resources will be most useful to them and what they're already using. This was invaluable in the development of Massachusetts's guide, and really helped to define its content and structure.

To review the latest version of the *Best Practices Guide*, please visit:  
<http://www.mass.gov/eopss/docs/mema/cert-best-practices-guide>