

Erie County CERT Goes to Jail

On March 11, 2015 twelve volunteers from the Erie County, Pennsylvania Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) went to jail, but not for the reasons one might think. Two days earlier in the early morning hours, a freeze plug in the water tower at the State Correctional Facility in Albion, Pennsylvania dislodged, releasing 1,200 gallons of water per minute onto the prison grounds. In response, the local water authority increased the flow into the tower to compensate for the lost water, but soon realized that continuing to do so would deplete the water supply that the local fire department depends on to protect the community. As a result, the water authority cut service to the prison at 2 p.m. that afternoon. For 72 hours, the prison and its nearly 2,400 inmates were without running water.

The prison enacted its emergency plan and began bringing in water buffalos (trailers for transporting water) bottled water, baby wipes, and 93 portable lavatories, but inmates started to become agitated because they were unable to take showers for nearly three days. “The correctional facility was worried that the situation would escalate and spiral out of control,” said Dale Robinson, Emergency Management Coordinator for the Erie County Department of Public Safety. While state contractors worked to repair the leak, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency started to request and deploy resources. Erie County deployed seven inflatable decontamination tents from neighboring counties and hospitals that belong to the Northwest Pennsylvania Emergency Response Group to the prison on March 11 as part of a plan to provide shower services for the inmates.



Erie County CERT volunteers assemble a Raker Shore as part of a course on structural collapse rescue operations.

At 6 p.m. that same day, Brian Mesaros, Emergency Management Deputy for the Erie County Department of Public Safety sent a message to Erie County CERT volunteers’ cell phones using the “I Am Responding” paging system to request their assistance. Within the hour, twelve volunteers arrived at the prison to assist nine members of the Erie County Hazardous Materials (HAZMAT) Response Team with setting up and operating the decontamination tents and water heaters. CERT volunteers also tracked all equipment used in the prison facility to support the response. Their efforts reduced the workload of the HAZMAT team, allowing them to focus on more complex tasks.

The prison implemented a screening process for all volunteers to ensure the safety of everyone involved. Prison staff also carefully monitored volunteers at all times to make sure that all items brought into the facility were removed after the conclusion of the response effort. Robinson says that all Erie County CERT volunteers are vetted and must pass a criminal background check prior to joining the team.

The Erie County CERT program's efforts did more than meet the immediate health needs of the inmates. Their services also helped to diffuse a potentially hazardous situation and create a safer environment for everyone in the facility. "The inmates could see out their windows that someone was actually doing something about the situation. They even thanked volunteers for coming in. CERT was seen as heroes in this incident because they helped bring relief to the inmates," said Mesaros.

The Erie County CERT comprises nearly 100 volunteers and is divided into four groups based on the skills and interests of the volunteers: 1) Emergency Operations Center (EOC) support, 2) logistics, 3) medical support, and 4) HAZMAT/Collapse rescue support. Robinson says breaking the team into groups appeals to a wide range of experiences, skills, and interests. It also keeps everyone engaged in activities and trainings that are important to them and focuses the program on the priorities and needs most important to the County. Erie County adopted this structure after it proved difficult to build momentum for their CERT program with a single, larger, less specialized group. Robinson says that volunteer feedback on the new model has been overwhelmingly positive. And even though they are organized into four different groups, they still work closely together. Robinson encourages them to regularly cross-train with one another so that teams and individual volunteers have opportunities to engage with one another and become more versatile. All but two of the CERT volunteers who supported the Albion correctional facility were members of the HAZMAT support group. The other two were from the EOC support group.

Volunteers supporting response efforts at the prison benefitted from the strong relationship between the County HAZMAT team and the CERT program, particularly the CERT HAZMAT support group. The County's Emergency Management program operates both groups, and many of the CERT instructors are also on the HAZMAT team, including the HAZMAT team chief. Because HAZMAT team leaders and instructors are familiar with the CERT volunteers and their training, and provide HAZMAT training to CERT volunteers, they were very aware of the CERT volunteers' capabilities and comfortable with trusting them with several tasks during response efforts. CERT volunteers had also worked with the HAZMAT team before setting up the decontamination tents.

Many of the county's CERT volunteers pursue training beyond the basic curriculum and are National Incident Management System (NIMS) credentialed in a variety of different areas, including incident command, building construction, structural collapse, and emergency vehicle operation. Erie County CERT partners with a variety of local emergency services, including fire departments, to train the CERT volunteers.

Robinson recommends that other programs work together with professional responders, emergency managers, and community leaders to develop advanced training opportunities for CERT volunteers. He states that this not only makes them a "great force multiplier" in the community, but also helps them gain recognition by community partners, describing these trainings as a "whole community approach and a good way for the team to get visibility with other departments."