

CERTCON 2015 Offers Drills, Skills, Thrills to Attendees

On June 20 and 21, 2015, the Montgomery County, Maryland CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) program hosted the fifth annual CERTCON, an event that draws CERTs from throughout the nation to network, train, and share best practices with one another. More than 200 participants gathered at the Universities at Shady Grove in Rockville, Maryland to attend presentations, workshops and panel discussions and participate in advanced disaster response training. CERT program managers, instructors, and volunteers from 30 CERT programs were in attendance, hailing from the District of Columbia, Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

CERTCON initially began in 2011 as the brainchild of Montgomery County CERT program manager, Greg St. James, who wanted to network with other CERT programs in the National Capital Region, which includes the District of Columbia and several jurisdictions in Virginia and Maryland. Montgomery County CERT hosted the first CERTCON Conference that year in Silver Spring, Maryland. Since that first CERTCON, Georgetown University (in Washington, DC), Fairfax County, Virginia, and Prince George's County, Maryland have all hosted the annual event. St. James said that different programs host the event on a rotational basis because "no individual jurisdiction has a lock on ideas or good ways to train, or the latest and greatest information. To be able to share this knowledge...everybody benefits."



CERTCON attendees participate in a surprise mass casualty drill centered on an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosion scenario.

The planning process for this year's conference started in fall 2014 with Montgomery County CERT volunteer David Steele leading a team of 20 CERT volunteers in organizing, promoting,

and ultimately implementing CERTCON. The planning committee worked closely with the Maryland Office of Emergency Management (OEM) to find grant funding to cover costs of the venue and other expenses. Fortunately, some members on the committee possessed professional event planning experience, which helped the process go smoothly. "CERT is all about leveraging the volunteers. They have donated several thousand hours throughout the year to planning the conference," said St. James. "Volunteers brought skills to the table that we didn't have to go out and buy." The planning committee also issued a call for presenters and ultimately selected a dozen speakers from several states. Presenters led breakout sessions on a variety of different topics relevant to CERT program managers, instructors, and volunteers, as well as others engaged and interested in emergency management and public safety.

The committee officially announced the opening of the registration period for CERTCON in March. Word spread quickly, and hundreds of CERT volunteers, military personnel, fire fighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians, health and human services representatives, and residents from across the nation (and even one participant from Tanzania) signed up to attend the event.

To promote CERTCON, the planning committee wrote and posted blogs on the CERTCON website to garner interest in the conference and reach more participants. Committee members also emailed participants and invited them to share conference information on their websites and listservs. In

addition, the CERTCON planning team used multiple social media outlets, including websites, Twitter, and Facebook, as well as videos posted to the CERTCON website to engage conference attendees.

During the conference, organizers set up a green screen to mimic a CERTCON red carpet. They photographed attendees in front of the green screen and encouraged participants to share the photos on social media. “The digital aspect was huge, and it was integrated in all parts of the conference experience,” said St. James.

This year, conference organizers put participants’ skills and abilities to the test during a surprise mass casualty drill. Montgomery County CERT conducted the drill to challenge attendees who completed a variety of training courses throughout the event as part of an entire track devoted to refreshing CERT skills. Conference organizers created a scenario centered on an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosion. To kick off the drill, organizers lit smoke bombs and started yelling. Responders quickly



CERT volunteers help a mock survivor of the CERTCON surprise mass casualty drill.

organized themselves using the incident command system and began transporting large numbers of mock survivors with severe injuries, including lost limbs and severe burns (portrayed by volunteers in full Moulage) away from the scene.

“The attendees had to respond without planning, warning, or gear other than what they had,” said St. James. “It really worked great and was a lot of fun! Folks responded wonderfully. Some even said it was the highlight of the weekend.” The drill provided an opportunity for participants to practice what they had learned and test their skills in a more realistic way than a precisely rehearsed

exercise with backpacks full of specific resources. “As CERT volunteers, people should be ready for situations that may not be expected, and do what they can with their training and supplies on hand,” he said.

In addition to the pop-up drill, participants also took part in training courses offered by several CERT programs and law enforcement and emergency management agencies from throughout the country, as well as the American Red Cross. Courses covered a variety of topics, including shelter fundamentals, bystander care, virtual situation reports, active shooter incidents, flood response, Moulage, and pet rescue and preparedness. There was even a course about applying theater role-playing techniques to disaster response training called “Rescue Improv.” During a “show and tell” portion of the conference, the Maryland State Police (MSP) Aviation Command landed its MSP Trooper 2 helicopter and highlighted the helicopter’s uses and capabilities along with other emergency response and command vehicles. St. James said that showcases and demonstrations like these, as well as advanced training courses, help to connect CERT volunteers with the larger first responder community.

St. James says CERTCON has been a great asset to the NCR because the conference provides regular training to those who may not have similar opportunities through their local CERT programs: “If CERT programs did nothing else except come for these two days of training every year, that’s not bad recurring training. I don’t think it’s enough, but it’s certainly a lot better than none,” emphasized St.

James. “CERTCON is a lot of ‘bang for the buck’ based on the leverage of volunteer hours and grant money of \$12,000 to \$15,000 for this much training and cross-collaboration between CERT programs and the NCR.” Many who attend CERTCON also do so with the understanding that there may come a time when they will all need to work together, even though they come from so many different jurisdictions, making opportunities to train together invaluable. “There is no replacement for knowing who the players are and having some kind of face-to-face, first name relationship in response to disasters,” explained St. James.

St. James has offered to help any CERT program interested in planning a conference of its own, especially if they plan to partner with programs in other state and local jurisdictions. If your program is interested, you can contact him at Greg.St.James@montgomerycountymd.gov.

Be sure to also visit <http://www.certcon.org> for post-conference coverage and announcements about CERTCON 2016, which will take place in Fairfax, Virginia.