

Newport News, VA CERT Supports Refugee Resettlement Program

Located on a peninsula in southeast Virginia and home to over 187,000 residents, Newport News is particularly vulnerable to disasters because the community can be easily geographically isolated from emergency services for prolonged periods. Newport News is also a welcoming city for the Refugee Resettlement Program offered by Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC), a non-profit organization that provides humanitarian services to individuals and families throughout Virginia. Refugees arrive from nations all over the world, including Cuba, Burma, Nepal, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but currently most of them come from Afghanistan. Newport News offers its community as a home for those pursuing a new life in the United States.

These individuals and their families are, like Newport News itself, very vulnerable to disasters. Among other challenges, language and literacy gaps, socio-economic factors, lack of access to phones, radios, televisions, and computers, and a general mistrust of government officials mean that they may not access critical information and resources available to the general public before, during, and after disasters. Most also come from parts of the world that don't experience natural disasters like thunderstorms, tornados, tropical storms, or hurricanes that are relatively prevalent in southeast Virginia. Many are also unfamiliar with emergency alerts and warning systems and have never lived in a home with smoke detectors or used a fire extinguisher. And most previously lived in places where ambulances and hospitals were hours away.

For over 35 years, CCC has assisted refugees as they integrate into the United States, helping them learn how to bank, apply for jobs, and use public services. In order to engage this segment of the population and help individuals and families become more disaster resilient and self-sufficient, Newport News CERT partners with CCC to provide free disaster preparedness training to refugees participating in the resettlement program within weeks of their arrival. This four-hour training helps participants to familiarize themselves with local hazards and potential medical emergencies, learn about local professional response services and how to contact them, and develop skills to help them stay safe and care for their families and neighbors.



Newport News CERT Program Manager Dana Perry (right) uses the Hazard House® to teach students about home hazards, fire safety, and disaster preparedness.

During this training, Newport News CERT addresses the language barrier in a variety of different ways. They do not use interpreters, because each class is comprised of individuals from a variety of different countries, meaning there is no common language. Interpreters would also be counter-productive to one

of the primary goals of the resettlement program, which is to fully immerse refugees in American culture and the English language. Instead, Newport News emphasizes creating a highly visual and hands-on learning environment.

For example, participants interact with a Hazard House ® with graphic panels that include information about fire hazards, smoke alarm testing and maintenance, and fire escape planning. Throughout the course, participants demonstrate what they've learned to show their mastery of the curriculum. They also watch videos, created by Newport News, that show them how to properly treat injuries. Newport News also provides them with hand-outs and pamphlets, produced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, with emergency information in both their native languages and in English.

The curriculum itself covers a variety of topics, including basic disaster preparedness, fire safety, first aid, and hands-only cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Newport News CERT uses flash cards to educate refugees about building supply kits, creating disaster communications plans, calling 911, and a variety of natural disasters, including tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods. "It's about teaching the science of survival. We provide tools to help them live safe and productive lives," says Newport News CERT Program Manager Dana Perry.

After completing the training, each participant receives a backpack filled with emergency supplies. For most of them, these are the only emergency supplies they possess. CCC also loans emergency alert radios to students when they begin the program. This is very helpful, and potentially even life-saving, as refugees are often without televisions or radios for a while after their arrival, which limits their access to emergency communications. Once the program ends, students can purchase and keep the radios. The proceeds go towards purchasing new radios for incoming students.

The biggest challenge Perry encounters is building trust between refugees, who have fled war and terror, and local government officials, including emergency services personnel: "They often arrive here distrustful of people in uniform and government in general based on their previous experiences in their countries of origin." Perry makes it a point to wear her fire department uniform during trainings to help show students that people in uniform can be trusted. After students complete the training course, uniformed police officers from the Newport News Police Department teach a class on personal safety, which also helps to establish a positive relationship between refugees and law enforcement.

Perry stresses that being polite and friendly also helps to build trust: "It translates into a million different languages. They see we genuinely care because we treat them with respect and kindness." At the



Newport News CERT Program Manager Dana Perry (left) teaches a student how to perform CPR.

beginning of the training, participants are often quiet and hesitant to interact. But by the end, it's clear that they are developing positive relationships with their instructors based on mutual trust and respect, and they are much more eager to fully engage and demonstrate what they've learned.

Since the program started in 2011, Newport News CERT has trained more than 500 refugees in partnership with CCC. Many of the participants also have families, and they pass on what they have learned to their spouses and their children. CCC caseworkers have provided feedback that participants continue to seek guidance following the training. They also see a greater awareness and eagerness to learn as much as possible about their new homes and personal responsibility to ensure their safety and that of their family. Some refugees have even volunteered to serve as mentors for recent arrivals to help them learn about local hazards and disaster preparedness. Newport News is also surveying former participants to see what additional trainings they can offer for refugees interested in continuing education opportunities.

The Newport News CERT program has also received wide recognition for its support of this program and other efforts. For example, in 2014, it earned the Commonwealth of Virginia Governor's Award for Outstanding Community Organization and was also nominated for the 2014 Mayor's Livable Cities Award. The Newport News CERT program is also a good partner for other nearby CERT programs, and coordinates a regional exercise for neighboring jurisdictions on an annual basis.

Suzi Smith, Resettlement Education Supervisor for CCC Refugee Resettlement, gave the Newport News CERT program a ringing endorsement in a letter of support: "Without the [Newport News CERT] stepping up and collaborating with our agency and many outside resources, this segment of people would be highly vulnerable...we endorse them for all of the volunteer work that is done to help ensure that the quality of information and education they provide our clients remains at the high level to which the [Newport News CERT Program] subscribes."