

The Villages CERT Performs Critical Role in Preparing Retirement Community

Sumter County, Florida is home to a fast-growing retirement community known as The Villages. This 22-year-old community has a population of more than 120,000 people and gains nearly 600 new residents each month. The Villages is 15 miles long, seven miles wide, and situated 58 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico and 75 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. The age of the average resident is 62 and health-related issues such as strokes, dehydration, and heart attacks are common concerns within the community.

The Villages is particularly unique because it boasts an active Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) of 320 retired residents with professional experience from several industries including medical, senior care, business, public safety, and communications. The Villages CERT organized in 2004 and was new to most community residents, so CERT commander Wayne Ward started a very active campaign educating community members about the program. CERT volunteers distributed nearly 25,000 documents containing CERT information, emergency contact numbers, and community listings throughout the neighborhood. Ward said these activities helped CERT become more recognized and requested at community events.

The Villages CERT offers two classes a month for basic training and volunteers must also attend annual CERT training to keep their skills current. The refresher courses include: patient assessment, CERT radios, evacuation, fire extinguishers, and medical knot tying for rescues. CERT also provides training for pandemic illnesses, and recently conducted an Ebola drill with the Sumter County Health Department.

In addition, CERT teaches residents automated external defibrillator (AED), Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), and Heimlich maneuver courses in conjunction with The Villages Department of Public Safety. “The biggest thing is teaching people these skills for issues that will happen most frequently.

Choking is a common occurrence,” said Ward. Currently, The Villages CERT program has trained nearly 500 people. As a result of the training, about 60 individuals have purchased AEDs to use within their homes and throughout the community during a medical emergency.

While CERT is a division of The Villages Department of Public Safety, the department allows CERT a considerable amount of independence in assisting the community. “The Public Safety Department has all the faith in the world in us, and we make sure they’re not disappointed,” said Ward. Many of the CERT volunteers are retired nurses and doctors who often support professional responders with medical tasks such as puncture wound treatment and splinting. Volunteers also provide medical supplies to fire and rescue units and help The Villages Department of Public Safety treat people suffering from heat stroke during warm weather.

In addition to providing medical support, CERT also educates residents about hurricanes – another concern for the community. Since The Villages is so far inland, some residents think a hurricane won’t strike the area. To address this, volunteers attend community social events and club meetings to teach residents about these storms and the CERT program. “You *can* have a hurricane and it can be a lot worse



CERT volunteers practice loading mock victims into a medical evacuation helicopter.

than the one before,” said Ward. “CERT is here because we expect it to happen...it’s just a matter of time. If you join CERT, we’ll teach you how to take care of yourself and your neighbors because you need to be prepared to spend 72 hours without help.” Consequently, CERT established eight first aid facilities around the community so residents can be self-sufficient and quickly access medical services when first responders are not available.

While CERT’s goal is to provide the highest quality emergency response to the community, “CERT really needs 1,000 members to support The Villages’ growing population,” explained Ward. To recruit new volunteers, CERT operates a booth at the community’s monthly newcomers meeting and teaches incoming residents about the program. Ward also writes newspaper articles about general safety and issues that are relevant in the community, which helped grow CERT membership from 120 to 320 volunteers.

Ward feels fortunate to have CERT members who are talented and dedicated to the community. Last year, CERT completed 11,000 hours of training and public service. “It’s very rewarding to see people this generous with their time!” he said. “Everyone feels accepted in the organization, and they appreciate it because they feel like they can do something for community.”

To keep volunteers engaged in the program, CERT regularly cross-trains with nursing homes, the American Red Cross, and the Sumter County Health Department so the organizations can be familiar with each other before a disaster strikes. CERT also serves as first responders to a Sumter County community located several miles away from The Villages because The Villages Department of Public Safety is closer and can respond to that community within seven minutes during an emergency. The Villages CERT trains Sumter County first responders in CPR and AED, which provides more time for CERT to respond to medical incidents. “Interfacing with other agencies benefits everyone in the community,” said Ward.

For communities looking to start their own CERT, Ward recommends finding a successful CERT program that can serve as a mentor, using their teaching aids, and taking advantage of other tools that are already available. For example, The Villages CERT helped another nearby retirement community and the City of Leesburg, Florida organize CERT programs.

Ward also offers this advice for CERT programs looking to engage with retirement communities: “Let them know who you are and what you do. Explain to them why it’s a benefit for them to join CERT and that you can teach them how to keep their friends and loved ones safe.”