

West Virginia CERT Programs Team Up for Diesel Spill Response

It was a cold, rainy evening on January 23, 2015, when icy roads caused a diesel fuel truck to overturn in Greenbrier County, West Virginia, releasing 4,000 gallons of fuel into a creek that flows into the Greenbrier River. This was especially critical because the Greenbrier River is the primary water source for the eastern part of the county, and feeds a water plant that serves nearly 12,000 people. To avoid contamination, the water plant shut its intake valves, leaving the entire community without water for 3-6 days depending on their location. The community immediately took action and West Virginia Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) stepped up to serve the community in need.

As a result of the water loss, the West Virginia Department of Highways delivered two 7,000 gallon and two 5,000 gallon water tankers to the community, including one to the Greenbrier Valley Medical Center because the hospital had to remain open for patient care. CERT programs from Greenbrier County and Monroe County Health Department sprang into action to open a water distribution center at the State Fairgrounds. Monroe County CERT leader and American Red Cross volunteer Brenda Reynolds received the initial call about the spill from the American Red Cross and she called Monroe County CERT volunteers, who responded within minutes. Some Monroe County CERT volunteers had prior water distribution and management experience stemming from an incident in 2012, which helped volunteers with the response effort.

In addition, Paula Brown, Deputy Director of Greenbrier County Homeland Security and Emergency Management deployed Greenbrier Valley CERT volunteers to assist with managing the water distribution center at the Fairlea Police Department and National Guard Armory in Maxwelton. This was the first joint incident response for the two CERT programs, but they have



CERT volunteers help set up and staff water tankers in Greenbrier County, West Virginia.

plans to establish a mutual aid agreement for support in the future. Emergency managers in Greenbrier and Monroe “often work together to address regional needs and when the scope of this incident required more manpower, our CERT teams deployed to meet the needs of the local residents,” said Brown. Our CERT programs are county-based and are deployed locally, but the parent organization, Greenbrier Valley Citizen Corps, is chartered to serve both counties.

Emergency Management and fifty volunteers, including individuals from the American Red Cross, local churches, schools, and twenty-five CERT volunteers worked together to set up water tankers, traffic flow and lighting. CERT also helped people fill and carry their personal water jugs. As news about the spill spread, neighboring counties, cities, local grocery stores, and West Virginia VOAD (Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster) assisted the community by donating nearly 100,000 bottles of water. “It was a perfect example of community support following a disaster,” Brown explained.

To accept, unload, inventory, and reload the donations for distribution, CERT volunteers staffed a warehouse and Reynolds took time to incorporate a little bit of fun into the mix with her large music collection. “We made the warehouse environment fun and turned what could have been a very labor intensive situation into a neighborhood block party,” she said. CERT volunteers delivered bottled water to area nursing homes, hospice, shut-ins, and senior apartment buildings in the community.

The collaboration among the American Red Cross, local churches, and CERT was a “fantastic unified response,” said Brown, describing the system Greenbrier County used to organize the joint effort. For this incident, the Red Cross managed volunteers and assignments while Brown and the Emergency Operations Center controlled product management, donations, and the distribution plan. During the incident, Brown gave her operations plan to the Red Cross manager, who then passed that information to the volunteers for them to follow when assembling deliveries. The American Red Cross also supplied CERT with an ERV vehicle for the deliveries. After hearing about the successful response in Greenbrier County, another neighboring county used the unified system to respond to a Bakken crude oil spill in their community.

Greenbrier Valley CERT organized in 2008, has 105 volunteers, and also serves as a model to Monroe County CERT. “Greenbrier is like a big brother to Monroe. They are bigger, better resourced, and have been around longer. We turn to them a lot for guidance and appreciate the opportunity to work with them,” said Monroe County CERT Program Coordinator Kelly Shreve. Conversely, Greenbrier Valley CERT seeks to capture the energy and vigor of Monroe County CERT. “The challenge now is to get our volunteers more enthused, so the Monroe County interaction is a huge benefit,” Brown explained.



CERT volunteers help residents in Greenbrier County, West Virginia carry water jugs.

Even though Monroe County CERT is a newer organization, they have been very active in the community. Monroe County CERT organized in 2012, has 75 volunteers, and offers a variety of trainings including traffic control, communications, animal rescue, point of dispensing, search and rescue (SAR), and forest fire training. Monroe County CERT works with local subject matter experts to teach several courses. For example, the chief ranger at the New River Gorge National Park teaches SAR, and the Monroe County volunteer fire department provides forest fire training. Monroe County CERT is also very active at community festivals, staffing first aid stations

and distributing information about CERT. They also offer preparedness training through local churches and 4H camps.

For all of the acts of service Monroe County CERT does in the community, one of the biggest ways the program gives back is through the Monroe Safety Checks Project. This initiative helps ensure the safety of older adults and individuals with disabilities and others with access and functional needs during power outages. As part of the project, CERT volunteers identify residents who are medically dependent on electricity and registers these individuals with the Monroe County Office of Emergency Management (OEM). CERT also provides residents with a landline phone, 72-hour go kits, and if needed, smoke alarms and Carbon Monoxide detectors. This effort is crucial in Monroe County, which has no hospital and limited cellular phone service.

During an outage, volunteers call residents to make sure they have access to oxygen and refrigerated medications. If a person cannot access their necessary items, volunteers deploy to the resident’s home and will contact the Monroe County 911 Center to dispatch help. If necessary, volunteers can store medications in a refrigerator at the CERT office. Therefore, “CERT is fundamentally important to the community and serves as a conduit between the Office of Emergency Management and the at-risk population,” said Shreve.

Both CERT programs receive grants from the West Virginia Office of Homeland Security and West Virginia Citizen Corps, but Monroe County CERT mostly conducts fundraisers to support the project. Monroe County CERT has raised nearly \$1,000 to purchase the telephones, kits, and detectors.

In the end, the Monroe and Greenbrier County CERT programs both demonstrate a strong commitment to the communities they serve, and their combined efforts form a unique balance of experience and energy. Both communities have limited emergency responder rosters so “it’s important here for CERT to supplement the efforts of first responders,” said Brown. “Our CERTs are located where they are needed most, in the heart of their communities, and every contribution they make directly helps their community and the surrounding areas.”