

## **Hawaii County CERT Rallies Disaster-Wearied Residents**

When most people think about the potential hazards relevant to Hawaii, some likely come to mind more readily than others: tsunamis, hurricanes, or even flows of lava. But in fact, on Hawaii Island, the largest island in the state, virtually every hazard, including tornados and winter storms, is a possibility. Being able to manage such a wide range of hazards is challenging, but professional responders in Hawaii County benefit greatly from the efforts of the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program, which regularly supports them during response and recovery operations. In Hawaii County, there are 22 CERT teams with approximately 400 active volunteers.

In 2014, Hawaii County CERT volunteers assisted with a slow-moving lava flow in the lower Puna district, which had also recently experienced the effects of two powerful hurricanes. We had the opportunity to learn more about how the CERT program supported the community and its residents during this turbulent period when we spoke with the following local CERT leaders:

- Francesca Martin-Howe, East Hawaii CERT Coordinator
- Dennis McCartin, Hawaii County CERT Operations Chief
- Sharon McCartin, Hawaii County CERT Assistant Operations Chief
- Bill Hanson, Hawaii County Civil Defense Agency CERT Coordinator

**Question: Can you please tell us about your community and what makes it unique in terms of the demographics of your island and the hazards your community faces?**

**Bill:** The island is just over 4,000 square miles. You can actually put all the other islands on our island. That's how big it is. We have two, if not three, active volcanoes on our island. Kilauea is the one that is erupting. It has continuously erupted for more than 30 years already and hasn't stopped, and there is no end in sight that we know of.

In terms of hazards on the island, some people are dumbfounded when we tell them we have blizzards. We get snow on this island, and we get a lot of it at times. We can have 15-foot snow drifts. We also have tornadoes on this island. What's kind of interesting is we have been under a drought for 28 years, but at the same time, we can get up to 3 feet of rain in 36 hours here as well.

**Question: Can you briefly describe the lava flow incident and its impact on the community and surrounding areas? How did CERT volunteers support the community?**

**Francesca:** The lava flow was officially titled the June 27, 2014 Lava Flow. This particular lava flow started coming out of Pu'u O'o, which is one of the vents fed by the Kilauea caldera that has been pumping lava to Kalapana for the past 30 years, and began moving toward the town of Pahoia on June 27.

The nature of the volcanoes out here are very slow moving. It's not like Mount Saint Helens where it is very explosive and eruptive with one big bang, and then you deal with the recovery and response of it. This was unique in the sense that it was a very slow-motion disaster. The other thing, which was very unique about this particular incident, was that as it became more and more threatening, it was piggybacked on two other natural disasters we had faced.

This started about a year ago today with Hurricane Iselle, which was the first recorded hurricane to actually hit Hawaii Island in recorded history. While we were dealing with relief efforts, there was another hurricane threat behind that called Julio, which never impacted us very much. It just passed us, but behind that was Hurricane Ana. We received pretty light impact from that, including a little bit of rain and surf, a little bit of storm surge, and then the June 27 lava flow. All of these disasters threatened the same community, the lower Puna district. Those were some of the heaviest hit places.

By the time the lava flow got there, the anxiety and stress levels were high. People were pretty “disastered-out” at that point. As the lava flow continued to come down, CERT was activated around October 8, 2014

to assist with anything we were needed for in the lava flow response.

**Dennis:** We did two-person staffing at incident command. We had two people assist the civil defense watch officer. We maintained our own sign-in sheets, an events log, and we reported all the information from the daily briefings. We also went out and helped with the observations of the lava flow. We did some of the monitoring, assisting with the measurements, going out and doing our own grid-square setup using GPS to monitor the in certain areas where the lava was flowing. We also assisted with the University of Hawaii unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) team doing some drone mapping. We escorted videographers that needed to go out there or other visitors that needed escorts.

As the lava got closer, we went out to do door-to-door notifications. Depending on how big of an area we had to cover, we had three to five teams of four to five people each, and we also used notification flyers. We asked people if they had evacuation plans in place, did they know if they had to leave where they would go, did they need sheltering assistance, would they need help getting their stuff moved, or did they have health issues. At night, the wind could change, and most of Pahoia could be covered in smoke and fog. People who had asthma or other breathing conditions had to go elsewhere. We were doing initial community assessments, and later on, we escorted the American Red Cross around for two assessments they had to perform.

**Bill:** The door-to-door notifications were also to the businesses in that area to tell them to prepare to possibly evacuate. All that anxiety being built up over the days and weeks was pretty stressful for everyone that was a part of it. They could lose their homes and their possessions, and there was nothing we could do about it because Mother Nature was making her way toward them. It was nice to see how strong the volunteers were, as well as the residents, throughout this ordeal.



CERT volunteers conduct a briefing before going door-to-door to inform residents about impending lava flow.

**Francesca:** It's very important to note that a lot of the CERT volunteers who were actively involved in this response were also at risk. There were a lot of people who lived in that lower Puna community whose homes were threatened by the lava. One minute the flow would be moving really quick, and everyone would be on high alert ready to go. Then the next morning, it slowed down, or stopped, or popped up somewhere else. The nature of it was painful, especially because the area is a low socioeconomic area. There's not much money in there, so there's not a lot of people who can go out and rent another house or go stay with their families elsewhere. Their entire livelihood was dependent on that one particular property. It was hard to tell them whether to stay or to go.

**Bill:** Francesca's home is down below that lava flow area, and it could have easily gone to her house as well.

**Question: How do you cope with that "disaster fatigue" as CERT volunteers?**

**Francesca:** The fact that I was a part of the process, I had access to what was going on, and I was taking an active role in doing what I could within my means to protect the people of my community empowered me to keep going. It could have potentially been different if I was not a part of the CERT program and was just sitting at home waiting for CERTs to come to my door and tell me what was going on. The fact that I was CERT and was part of this process, and I had these things to do, kept my mind actively engaged in staying proactive as opposed to being more fear-based.

**Bill:** The CERTs also took an opportunity every Thursday night to host a town meeting at the Pahoehoe high school about what was going on and shared stories. We also took the opportunity to set up a CERT booth.

**Dennis:** A few of our volunteers offered to man the booth and pass out information about the CERT program, talk to the community members, and get them to sign up for training. It became a recruiting opportunity. A lot of those people have since gone through the CERT training.

**Question: Do you think there was an increased interest in CERT training because other residents also wanted to be more proactive, have a role, and feel empowered during these types of events?**

**Bill:** Residents would see CERT volunteers around with their hats and vests on, and with their clipboards. After a while, and seeing the familiar faces, the residents remembered who more of the volunteers were.

**Sharon:** When we would go to community meetings, the community members would come up and talk to us, and remembered us going door to door, telling us how much they appreciated our efforts and what we do for the community. Sometimes we are not from that particular community, but we support all the communities together. If there is disaster on the west side, those of us on the east side would go to the west side to support them, as they do to help support us.

**Dennis:** We also developed much improved working relationships and visibility with a lot of the public safety agencies, including both police and fire.

**Question: What do you think about the CERT program's role and performance in this particular incident?**

**Francesca:** Because we had so many back-to-back disasters, there was a strong need for CERTs to be out there to help. CERT really got a chance to shine. We really were tried and tested, and we performed very well. During instances beforehand there were particular agencies or individuals who were hesitant or wary about volunteers taking an active role perhaps due to liability concerns or if they were concerned that because we are volunteers, there is not that same level of necessarily having to answer for or to someone the way professional responders do.

CERTs were allowed to take an active role and work side-by-side with some of these agencies, and we did a really good job. The feedback we received after the fact from the people who were wary at first kind of changed their minds about it. They now view us as a valuable resource.



Lava flow in Pahoehoe, Hawaii threatens the community.

**Bill:** I think one of the reasons why that happened is the approach that the CERTs took. They came in as humble servants asking, “What would you like us to do?” That approach really went over well with not only the community, but with incident command, the emergency management teams, and responders out there.

**Dennis:** I think we showed that we were organized, that we knew what we were doing, and that we were trustworthy.

**Question: How did CERT volunteers make a difference during response efforts?**

**Bill:** The most important thing to have is partnerships in our communities. It was nice to see that CERT has been built up over the past few years to a point where administration in the county can say they need our assistance, which led to other things. It’s actually a little bit of a snowball effect. We saw that with other organizations and between the communities and associations, and the local government is now starting to partner even more. In a way, CERT was a catalyst for making that happen.

**Francesca:** Certain areas got to look at CERT as a volunteer organization and see how closely we were able to work with professional agencies. The support that we received from civil defense, as well as the Fire Department and the Mayor, gave the community associations and smaller, more resiliency-oriented volunteer organizations hope. They saw that we weren’t just on our own.

They are able to make that relationship with those agencies and find those answers. In a way, I feel like it kind of opened a door that welcomed them in when they may have felt hesitant to reach out in that direction beforehand.

**Bill:** You can see that CERT bridged that need for trust in the communities. I’m a government employee, and if I go out there, they will look at me as such. But if Sharon, Dennis, or Francesca went out into their own community, they aren’t looked at as government employees. They are one of the community members, and the residents are going to listen to them before they even listen to me. It was really nice being able to see that come together.

**Francesca:** To touch on that point a little bit further too, there is a difference when we do door-to-door notifications, being from that particular community and also being affected yourself, you can actually stand there, tried and true, and look them in the face to tell them, "I understand. I'm in the same boat."

It does add a different element, as opposed to Bill walking in. Some of the community members might react to him saying, "You don't understand what we're going through because you're not really in it." In a way, it allowed for a level of comfortability, as well as that trust factor between the community and CERT teams, and the link between the professional agencies.

**Question: What did you learn from this activation? Is there anything you would do differently next time?**

**Francesca:** We completed approximately 907 hours of service on just the lava flow, which was distributed among 47 CERT members representing 9 different CERT programs across the island. Because it was so slow motion, it allowed CERT and professional responders the time that they needed to look at things logistically, plan, and adapt as needed. It allowed us to make very informed decisions.

It really tested the passion and the heart that we have for volunteerism because it was such a long activation. We learned about the importance of standardization in providing the proper documentation from our response. We resorted to taking notes in our personal notebooks, and in the aftermath, we had to transcribe through all the different handwritings. We are really pushing for a standardized system on reporting so that if we were to hand it off to a county professional responder, they would be able to understand that formatting. We are trying to stick to the county system so there are not a lot of questions in that transfer of information.

**Bill:** One thing we caught kind of late was when we went door to door, we realized there were other entities that also wanted to go door to door as well. We went door to door, and all of a sudden, another team was going door to door, and two or three days later, another CERT was going door to door. We learned that before we go door to door, we need to make sure that if any other entities want to go door to door, we do it collectively as a task force versus as just an individual CERT program.

**Francesca:** We also learned that we needed to get a greater understanding of each agency's responsibilities so that we don't duplicate efforts and so that we can understand if we take in a particular type of information, which particular department is going to need it. Learning what each agency does exactly, what we can expect, and what we cannot expect was a really important lesson that came out of all of this.