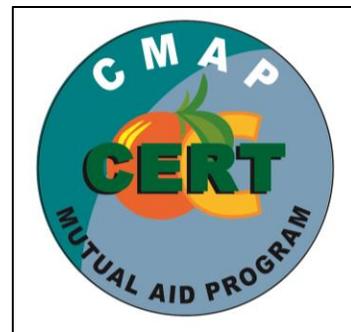


### **Orange County CERT Mutual Aid Program Wins Award for Outstanding CERT Initiative**

Resource development is a significant concern for Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) leaders throughout the nation, who must be proactive in securing supplies, equipment, and other resources to maintain their programs. However, it may be that the best resource for a CERT program is, in fact, another CERT program. At least, this is what 24 CERT programs in Orange County, California have found. Together, they have worked to develop the Orange County CERT Mutual Aid Program (CMAP), an extensive network of volunteer programs in their county. The overarching goals of CMAP are to promote all of the CERT programs in Orange County and to maintain formal processes through which they can help one another in times of need, especially during disasters that impact multiple jurisdictions. In recognition of its efforts and innovation, CMAP recently received the [FEMA 2015 Individual and Community Preparedness Award for Outstanding CERT Initiative](#).

CMAP began in 2005, when CERT coordinators from 13 programs within Orange County began meeting once a month to share ideas, talk about how they could help one another, and work toward sharing the county's Homeland Security grant funds. Of the initial 13 members, some of the programs, such as Huntington Beach CERT and Anaheim CERT, were very well established, while others were in the early stages of development. And as federal funding declined, the relationships that these programs established with one another became even more important.

"In 2006 and 2007, we were kind of going gangbusters," explained Matt Brisbois, life safety specialist with the Newport Beach Fire Department and coordinator of Newport Beach CERT, "but when the economy tanked in 2008, we needed each other. We needed to go after the grant funds collectively. We were very worried that programs were going to start dropping off, and I think we did a really good job here in Orange County of keeping most of our programs viable. We continue to add programs because there are 34 cities in our county, and if you don't have a CERT program, residents will ask why because everyone else has one."



"It had to be about how we could help the county," said Brenda Emrick, instructor and coordinator of Costa Mesa CERT. "Every time Homeland Security grant funding came up, we asked ourselves what we were doing for the organization. We split the funding received from the grants equally so all participating programs got the resources they needed. It was the equalization of the program resources and trainings that made us successful."

In addition to making sure all programs had necessary resources, coordinators also wanted CERT courses to be uniform and available to all CMAP volunteers. "We would watch each other's classes to see how others were taught and determine how we would do it," said Brisbois. "It made a difference to know that if we were teaching a disaster psychology CERT class in Costa Mesa and somebody missed a class, they could come make it up in Newport Beach. That was a great starting point for our program."

In September 2007, CMAP completed its first activation. "The whole state of California was on fire, and there was literally no one else to help. We were the last resort that was available," said Brisbois. "It was a really big response, and we learned so much from it. It really resulted in us determining how to develop a manual, some protocols, and work with the county to formalize this so people knew what they were requesting from volunteers." During the 2007 activation, CMAP had nearly 250 volunteers at

the command post for 12 days helping to manage the 24-hour response. “It required a lot of collaboration and coordination,” said Emrick, “and we realized we needed to do so much more.”

CMAP also had to clearly define volunteers’ roles during activation to those in command. “There are a lot of people who don’t know CERT or have an understanding of CERT that think we can do everything,” said Brisbois. “We can do a lot, but there are also things that are out of the scope or not appropriate for volunteers to be doing at some of these sites.” The volunteers performed admirably during this first mutual aid activation, and their efforts boosted the credibility of the program in the county and positively influenced perceptions about CERT volunteers’ capabilities among professional responders and emergency managers. After the activation, CMAP coordinators recognized the need for all volunteers to have matching helmets and vests to avoid confusion during disaster response operations.

Between 2007 and 2008, CMAP expanded from 13 to 18 CERT programs, with program leaders still meeting once a month. In 2008, CMAP volunteers deployed a second time after Orange County fire officials requested their assistance with the ongoing response to a large-scale fire. However, by the time volunteers arrived, leadership over the response had transitioned to a state-level fire incident management team that was not familiar with CERT capabilities, and so was hesitant to assign tasks to them. It took in-county professional responders 12 hours to convince the new leadership that CERT volunteers could support logistics, including delivering food and water to responding fire agencies. Some CERT volunteers were disappointed, because they were initially expecting to be more involved in response efforts when they were deployed. Following the activation, CMAP program coordinators agreed that a clear list of expectations be required when requesting assistance from CERT programs neighboring jurisdictions, so that volunteers and team leaders understand their roles before responding to an emergency incident. Knowing more about the needs for a specific response also makes it easier to match those needs with the specific skills of individual CMAP volunteers.



Orange County CMAP volunteers set up a food distribution station during a recent activation.

“Having a mutual aid plan in place that the county recognized was absolutely the priority once we finished that 2008 response,” said Emrick. “We realized that we needed to sit down as a county and evaluate the strong points of why people want to volunteer, what they want to get out of it, and what we need to get out of it. So it pushed us to that response capacity to have something in writing that nobody could challenge.” In mid-2009, the County Council supervisors officially approved CMAP.

Following the county’s Emergency Management Mutual Aid process, the coordinators of the 18 CERT programs submitted a request to the county to formalize CMAP. Once approved, the CERT programs received an Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) grant to purchase standardized regional equipment, which CMAP uses during activations and training exercises.

CMAP coordinators also created a CERT Mutual Aid supplemental module, a 6-hour joint training class that is mandatory for all CERT volunteers participating in CMAP activations. The purpose of the training

module is to ensure that all CERT volunteers that are eligible for mutual aid deployments have the same basic instruction in the skill sets they are most likely to use during these types of operations. Topics in the curriculum include the Incident Command System (ICS) (in greater detail than the CERT Basic Training), team communications (including how to operate an amateur radio), standardized documentation, and conflict resolution. It also covers volunteer expectations, requirements, and attire, and addresses many of the questions, issues, and lessons learned that have come up in post-activation after action reports, both for CMAP and for individual CERT programs.

“We needed to identify what was the most critical information we needed, including how to demobilize, park in the right place, fit into the system, do what we are asked to do, and not go beyond our parameters,” said Emrick.

“When you explain the ICS structure to them, the volunteers start to really get it. I think the mutual aid class brings it home to them because they know this is how it has happened before in Orange County and how it will happen again,” Brisbois explained. “We now have incidents we can relate back to that help us determine our weaknesses and let them know we are not lining up 1,000 CERT volunteers with fire extinguishers to put out wildfires. That’s not the intent of their activation. Their activation is more on the support side and the role they will be filling. We are helping logistically, and the fact that we did such a good job in 2007 and 2008 really put us on the map in Orange County as a resource to utilize.”

The training also emphasizes that volunteers be aware of what is expected of them before deploying, know what supplies they need to bring with them in order to be self-sufficient for at least 12 hours, and know how to work well with volunteers from other programs. “We’ve worked really hard over the last eight years to get our volunteers to understand if you are going on a mutual aid call, what the expectations are, what you are expected to show up with, and what is needed for you to assist with,” said Brisbois. “When our volunteers take the mutual aid class, they sign a document that says they understand what their expectations are, and I think that is really important. It’s important for them to know what they are getting into and what they are doing.”

The CERT coordinators say they owe much of the success of CMAP to meeting on a monthly basis, and they encourage other CERT programs interested in starting a mutual aid program to do the same. Meeting regularly means that the 24 CERT programs that currently participate in CMAP all have good situational awareness of what the other programs are doing, where and when large events will be taking place, and how they can help. “Our programs would not be successful without each other,” said Brisbois. “We really do benefit each other greatly, and our volunteers work well together when they go to events. They understand this is all for mutual benefit.”

Both Emrick and Brisbois note the importance of settling all issues during the meetings. “When we leave the meeting, we are all on the same page,” said Emrick, “and that has made us a very strong force in the county.”

Newer programs have found it much easier to participate in CMAP because much of the foundational work has already been done. They also benefit from the willingness of more senior CERT coordinators to share their resources and knowledge with incoming programs. “They don’t have to reinvent the wheel and recreate everything because we are perfectly willing to share all of our tools,” said Brisbois. In fact, he encourages new programs to put their own logos onto the tools his program has developed and make them their own.

“That’s the beauty of what we have been able to do out here in the County,” said Emrick, “and it’s because we had really great coordinators and programs. Even though we are all our own individual programs, we come together once a month, we get together for exercises, we get together as a planning team, and nobody is saying ‘this is mine.’ Everybody is saying ‘this is ours.’ This is how we can help one another.”