

### **Southern California Tribal Communities Teach Teens Emergency Response Skills**

In 2007, wildfires struck several tribal communities in southern California, resulting in widespread devastation throughout the area. In the aftermath, tribal leaders in the region created the Inter-Tribal Long Term Recovery Foundation (ITLTRF) to help southern California tribal communities recover from the disaster and be more proactive in preparing for hazards. “We started in the aftermath of the third most catastrophic fire in 10 years, and it became clear that these incidents were not going away. We initially coordinated to help with recovery, and then we transitioned into preparedness and mitigation mode,” explained ITLTRF Executive Director Theresa Gregor.

ITLTRF’s preparedness efforts included offering the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) basic training course to teen members of local tribal communities. “We needed the tribes to understand that emergency management isn’t just about having a firefighter or police officer on your tribal payroll. We have to educate the youth, and we have to make disaster preparedness a part of the daily business of the tribe and the daily habit of every citizen,” Gregor said. “It is always important to educate the youth and strengthen them with knowledge. I think CERT is a super good fit for teaching preparedness and how to support the community.”

CERT was particularly appealing because it tied well into an existing culture of preparedness in the tribal community: “It’s built into our culture that we always prepared for

the coming seasons”, explained Gregor. “We had people who would pay attention to signs in the weather, being able to recognize that something might be coming by observing animals or just the wind change. I tell students that we have always been on alert.”

ITLTRF organized its first Teen CERT training course for the Los Coyotes Band of Cahuilla Indians in 2012. Two years later, the Lipay Nation of Santa Ysabel hosted a combination adult and Teen CERT class; ITLTRF helped coordinate the trainers and supplies. In addition, the ITLTRF offers the CERT Basic course to its Inter Tribal AmeriCorps Preparedness Members serving at ITLTRF.

ITLTRF works with a variety of partners, including the Inland Valley CERT program and other non-tribal organizations, to secure instructors for the training. Inland Valley CERT is organized under the Pala Fire Department and ITLTRF teamed up with them to offer a CERT Basic class in July 2015 with about 12 representatives from three tribal groups attending. Gregor invites CERT instructors to tribal functions and workshops so they can meet members of the community and learn more about tribal cultural



Tribal CERT students perform a cribbing exercise.

practices. This helps them to improve the quality and relevance of their instruction: “During the workshops, we talk about the different styles of learning and educational issues on tribal lands that are relevant to native students.” Having tribal fire departments also provide instructors for the class helps engage students more dynamically in the CERT program. Gregor said that the students “automatically respect them because they come in uniform, they are knowledgeable, professional, and they have that aura of respect.”

While ITLTRF works with four different tribal groups spread out across 17 separate reservations in southern California, the cultural differences between these groups—Cahuilla, Cupeño, Luiseño, and Kumeyaay—are not as distinct as one might imagine. Gregor explained that despite the fact they speak different languages, they share many of the same practices and values, making it easier to provide training that is relevant to multiple tribal cultures. Gregor said that the training emphasizes cross-cutting “cultural values and beliefs such as taking care of your neighbors, family, and community because these values are intrinsic.” When she discusses the training with tribal community members, Gregor tries to draw parallels to traditional practices as well: “We want to focus on the fact that we are giving them modern tools for doing things the tribe has done since its beginning. That is the way I talk to the community. I tell them it is nothing new. It’s just a new way of talking about it.”

Gregor believes that their efforts have been successful because the training is adapted specifically for tribal communities: “What makes them unique, and what makes them different from neighboring jurisdictions, cities, or urban areas. I think it gives people a better sense of how to respond to what is going to happen on their land and in their homes versus more generalized training that you get from the CERT manual. We really try to add in our aspects of what the situations will be like in our rural environments on our reservations.”

Instructors also incorporate fire, evacuation, and communication drills into the curriculum to make it even more hands-on, and tailor these drills to be relevant to teens: “For all of the drills, we make them relatable to what teens would be experiencing. We ask questions like, ‘What is the first thing you are going to do if you sense a major earthquake,’ and of course we know they are going to say, ‘I’m going to text my friend, or check my Facebook, Snapchat, or Twitter.’ Then we talk about what they would do if that is not available, and for them, that is beyond their perception because everything is so tech-focused. We talk about the advantages of texting versus calling, or having a landline phone. Some of the teens don’t have landlines. Educating them about maintaining a landline is important because they can use it in an emergency situation,” said Gregor.

The training stresses that younger members of tribal communities may be on their own during emergencies, and may need to assist elders. Gregor explained that frequently, “the youth and elders are the ones who are at home on the reservations while the middle-aged folks are off the reservation at work. If an event occurred, it is important for the youth to understand how to respond properly, how to be able to assist an elderly relative or neighbor, and the students really take that seriously.”

ITLTRF also brings in mental health workers to help discuss sensitive topics covered in the CERT basic curriculum, such as traumatic injuries or death, with teen participants. “Unfortunately, we do have high

rates of accidents where people are injured, and [the teens] see a lot of that to a certain extent,” said Gregor. “We have conversations about what they see and experience. The main thing we stress to them is that they will see things that may make them uncomfortable, and if that’s the case, they need to talk to somebody,” said Gregor.

Parents often play a supporting role in Teen CERT training. “Most parents tend to like [the CERT program] and some even sit in on classes. One tribe did adult and youth, more like a family CERT. In another, three parents sat in on a class for CPR training, and the parents also did the CPR as well. I think it makes everybody feel safer, and that’s the goal. We want to give them the tools to respond in the right way and not become a bigger part of the problem,” Gregor said.

On CERT graduation day, family members also portray mock survivors during the final exercise. Gregor often hears a great deal of positive feedback from parents at the end of the training: “[Parents] are always amazed at the level of organization and maturity that comes from taking the class, seeing them in their gear and taking it seriously. The parents are pretty impressed and proud of them.”

The training appears to be sticking with the teens after they take it. Gregor spoke of how, after one group completed their training, they returned to their high school and offered to help with fire drills and any other drills the school might be interested in doing. “The school was really impressed that the students did this over the summer, and they came back and were proud of it and wanted to contribute to the safety of the school.” The school included the students in subsequent exercises, tasking them with helping classrooms evacuate and other responsibilities.

When asked for her advice for other tribal organizations and communities that may be interested in Teen CERT, Gregor advised against leaving out or toning down any of the content in the basic CERT curriculum: “Don’t sugarcoat anything. Don’t think that just because they’re youth that you have to water it down. You have to be careful about sensitive topics, but for the most part they are more than capable enough to understand the contents of CERT.”