

Bunkie, LA Teen CERT Camp Helps Youth Become Preparedness Leaders

Our nation's youth can play an important role in contributing to national preparedness and resilience. Programs like Teen CERT (Community Emergency Response Teams) provide basic disaster preparedness and response training to youth and encourage them to become preparedness leaders in their homes and communities. Since 2009, Bunkie, LA has been home to an annual Teen CERT Academy that prepares Louisiana teens not only for natural disasters, but also for other emergency situations that can impact youth.

During the week-long camp, which accepts teens ages 13 – 18, Academy participants take part in disaster response training, team building exercises, competitive events, and fun recreational activities. Lieutenant Lafate Elliott Day, Jr., Academy Director and Negotiations Coordinator with the Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office, originally organized the camp to help support the Office's *Explorers* program, a youth group that he manages. The *Explorers* program offers youth opportunities to explore a career in law enforcement and to give back to the community.

Lt. Day believes it's vital that members of the public, including youth, be prepared to assist others in the event of an emergency: "Everybody considers fire, police, and paramedics as our first responders, but when you look at core values of CERT, first responders are the regular person on the street. We hope to prepare kids to make good decisions and, in case of emergency, to assist people in situations."

When Lt. Day first mentioned his idea about starting a Teen CERT



A tree fell onto an unoccupied cabin at the Bunkie Teen CERT Camp.

camp for participants in the *Explorers* program during a regional Citizen Corps meeting six years ago, other parishes immediately wanted to know if they could send participants as well. From there, the idea blossomed into the first Teen CERT Academy. During its first year, nearly 60 teens attended, and the number of annual participants has nearly tripled since then.

The Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP) sponsors the Academy, largely with funding available through the State Homeland Security Grant Program. The Bunkie camp site provides a central location for attendees and costs the Academy a total of \$95 per participant for lodging and meals.

GOHSEP and the State Citizen Corps Council ask Council members (which include public, private, and non-profit organizations) and Emergency Operations Center directors throughout the state to send youth to the camp each year. "Last year, which was the largest, there were 13 youth groups, and a total of 160 participants." said Lt. Day. Youth from a variety of organizations, including church groups, Boy Scouts of America, junior firefighter organizations, and Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC)

were in attendance this past year. Each group provides its own leadership and chaperones, but Louisiana Teen CERT provides the training.

Safety is the main priority over the course of the week: "In case there is an accident, we keep an emergency kit, first aid bags, and a golf cart there so we can provide emergency services to someone," said Lt. Day. The camp is also less than seven miles from the nearest hospital.

Instructors volunteer their time to provide training in a variety of emergency response skills to camp participants. And because hurricane preparedness is a particularly high priority in Louisiana, camp instructors also teach participants how to build emergency kits and create evacuation plans on the first day. The camp also incorporates peer-to-peer training, which helps teen participants feel empowered and provides them with opportunities to further develop their leadership skills, and also resonates well with students in the classroom: "Kids really do respond to being taught by their peers rather than having an adult telling them what to do," said Lt. Day.

In addition to teaching the basic CERT curriculum, the Academy also works with the Louisiana Department of Highway Safety to incorporate content on safe driving. Each year's camp also includes a mock scenario exercise. The 2013 exercise replicated a driving while intoxicated (DWI) incident where students went through a mock DWI checkpoint with local police. To make this scenario more realistic, some students were assigned "injuries" (simulated with moulage) while others practiced recently-learned first aid skills to treat them. In 2012, staff led teens in a mock overnight plane crash scenario. Camp participants conducted building searches of all cabins in the camp to make sure everyone was safe and accounted for, and then set up an overnight volunteer center in the cafeteria. The following morning, participants set up search and rescue teams to search the property (140 acres) for survivors.

In some years, the mock scenarios have given way to actual emergencies. In 2013, severe storms forced camp attendees to shelter-in-place and the same line of storms caused a tree to fall onto an unoccupied cabin. Once the storms passed, students put a search and rescue "X" on the outside of the cabin door so emergency officials would know the cabin was empty. "They weren't told to do it," said Lt. Day. "They did this on their own. We saw the kids put their training to use."

Louisiana State Citizen Corps Program Manager Khri Douglas believes that the Academy serves as an empowering resource for teens and helps them to become preparedness leaders in their home communities, and hopes that it will help strengthen the CERT program statewide: "As a state, it would benefit us for Teen CERT members to go into their communities, take ownership of the program, and become full CERT members in a parish." After the success of the Teen CERT Academy in Bunkie over the past several years, it appears as though the idea of a Teen CERT Camp is catching on elsewhere in the state. The New Orleans Region 1 UASI Citizen Corps Council, which serves the Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes, recently hosted its second annual Teen CERT Camp, which had 132 teens in attendance.

Lt. Day credits the birth of the Bunkie Teen CERT Academy to his supportive sheriff, Craig Webre. "When I did my initial Teen CERT presentation, he saw the potential of what it could be and gave me carte blanche to do it. We leveraged the Sheriff's Office's resources and our own advisors and instructors to make it happen."

Lt. Day stresses that starting and maintaining a Teen CERT camp has to be a team effort, and that it takes multiple partners working together to be successful: "The big thing is leveraging resources and including other people. Don't try to grab something like this and do it by yourself. I know I get a lot of credit for starting it, but the other groups contributed greatly. It's not an individual accomplishment. If you really want to be successful you have to include everybody in it. If you start knocking on enough doors and get loud enough, it will happen. Find somewhere that will host, someone that will teach, and let it start to grow."