

Lincoln County, OR School District Teen CERT Programs Prepare Youth for “The Big One”

Imagine living in an area at risk of enduring a magnitude 8 or 9 earthquake with four to six minutes of intense shaking, followed by tsunami surges lasting 12 hours or more. For residents located in coastal communities in Lincoln County, Oregon, that is a risk they live with every day: “The Big One.” This area is at such a risk of a large, severe earthquake because it is situated in what’s known as the Cascadia Subduction Zone (CSZ). The CSZ is a fault line stretching from northern Vancouver Island to northern California and mirrors the fault line in Japan that caused a major earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

“When this event occurs, coastal communities will be cut off from normal transportation routes due to bridge failures and landslides, and tsunamis. In addition, many buildings will suffer severe damage from the initial earthquake and aftershocks, leaving residents without shelter. This is the scenario we are preparing for with Teen CERT.

Having that big earthquake and then a tsunami for 12 – 24 hours, and being isolated for several weeks before help can arrive,” said Sue Graves, coordinator for the Lincoln County Teen CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) program.

Lincoln County is about the size of Rhode Island, and is very rural. Cities in these coastal communities are far apart from each other, meaning that assistance from professional responders may be a long time coming in the event of an emergency,

especially during a catastrophic incident. “In Oregon, communities along the inland I-5 corridor are going to have major earthquake damage, and FEMA and Oregon Emergency Management told us help will go there first because they are higher population areas,” Graves said.

The community is even more vulnerable because of high levels of poverty citywide. “We are incredibly low income. This year, all students in Lincoln County receive free breakfast and lunch because the district income level qualifies for a “Community Eligibility Program,” a pilot program authorized by Congress as part of the Healthy-Hunger Free Kids Act,” said Taft High School Principal Majalisse Tolan. Lincoln City also has a very high homeless population: from 2014 – 2015, more than 200 students grades K – 12 were homeless.

Most citizens are aware of the particular vulnerability of their community, and consider resiliency and self-sufficiency to be high priorities. “We like to say that we are a very resilient population educating resilient people with skills needed when there is a crisis. What makes this program so amazing is that we’re really giving students survival based skills,” said Tolan.



Taft High School Teen CERT students set up a tent that will be used to shelter students and staff after a large earthquake.

Two schools in the Lincoln County School District, Taft High School and Waldport High School, have established Teen CERT programs, funded through personal donations, community fundraisers, and grants from the U.S. Department of Education. The school district also partners with the local police and fire departments and county commissioners to supply six disaster caches placed throughout the district. While each cache varies in size and stock depending on the amount of money raised to purchase supplies, the cache at Taft High School contains enough water, shelter, medical, and sanitization supplies to support 1,300 people for several weeks. Taft High School is also a designated tsunami evacuation site, and has trained Teen CERT responders on site to assist in the event of an earthquake and tsunami.

“We have amazing community partners, and everyone here really understands our risks. There is a lot of collaboration between agencies and organizations to fund disaster caches because we understand that when this event happens, we are going to be without power, sewer, water, and electricity for a long time, so we have to prepare to shelter and take care of basic needs,” Graves said.

To encourage support for the program, Graves developed a strategy that benefits the entire community. If the disaster occurs while school is in session, students and staff will automatically assume control of disaster cache resources, and city and fire officials will help other community members; but if school is not in session, city and fire officials can deploy disaster cache resources as needed.

Graves also created a presentation to help

supporters understand the community’s risks clearly. “Basically, it’s marketing. You have to convince others of what you want to accomplish. You have to make it real – not in a scary way, but in a realistic way. Show them the risks and how to mitigate those risks so they can see this is a survivable event and that we can make it through; but we have to do it together,” she said. “It takes time to get out there. We talked to so many businesses, organizations, and people. We got online to search for grants. So many big companies have grants, but you have to find ones that are disaster preparedness or youth focused.”

During the school year, CERT instructors partner with professional responders and other community members to help provide training for the semester-long program. “We do disaster simulations with local CERT teams that are active in the fire department. The CERT teams come and critique our simulations. The firefighters demonstrate the proper method for putting out fires, and a retired seismologist, Kay Wyatt, teaches earthquake safety and science. She’s so good with this that students are mesmerized for an hour,” said Taft High School Teen CERT Instructor Bruce Rasmussen.



Taft High School Teen CERT students perform a fire suppression drill at Gleneden Beach Fire Station.

At Taft High School, second year Teen CERT students help provide training for leaderships labs, which are intended to help students enhance their ability to lead, follow and work as a team. During leadership labs, students participate in team-building missions around the school, which Graves believes is very beneficial: “The leadership labs are a huge key to success for Taft High School. The labs shape students’ abilities to work as a team and learn roles that team members have to play. It’s phenomenal to see how students have grown in their abilities to be effective team members during the semester.”

In 2014, Taft High School incorporated a final simulation for Teen CERT, which featured an earthquake drill and evacuation, into its building safety procedures. “The kids were silent and you could hear Teen CERT students head over to the cache and start their deployment of how they would find student actors trapped in the building. Student actors in the library made it possible for CERT students to really re-enact an incident that was something they could truly face. It was good for everyone to watch this take place. It upped the importance of emergency preparedness and increased the importance of how we prepare as a building and as humans,” said Tolan.

Recently, a phone threat against Lincoln City Schools resulted in a campus lockdown for nearly two hours. This incident served as an



Taft High School Teen CERT students practice survivor extrication in the school’s library during an earthquake drill.

opportunity to prepare students for the physical and psychological impact of experiencing a disaster while in school, where cell phone service is particularly weak because of the construction of the school. “We worked with the whole student population about how people respond differently to unknown situations, particularly the inability to communicate in the school building where we have only 50 percent cell service. We talked about being in a situation where we would not be able to communicate with family, and about how the lockdown impacted students and their parents,” said Tolan. The lockdown also helped students better understand the importance of following disaster plans and procedures.

Since starting Teen CERT, Lincoln County School District has found it necessary to update some of its policies and procedures to ensure every student benefits from the program. “We had an application process where students had to have a certain behavior record or grade point average, but we did away with that after the first semester because we realized any student can learn this,” said Graves.

“Our class is very hands on and empowering for kids to learn these skills...It was impressive for fellow students to see these Teen CERT students take on something so important, and to demonstrate their rescue skills in front of 700 kids watching. It was powerful for adults to see it as well,” said Tolan.

During the program's fourth year, instructors worked with local CERT volunteers from the surrounding community to develop a certification process for the course that students must complete before participating in the final exercise. "We certify each student in specific skills that we want to make sure they have down before they go to the final exercise," said Graves. "It proved to be a helpful, intermediate step to build confidence, reinforce training, and demonstrate what the students learned to the adult CERT members."

"Adding the skills test with adult CERT coming in and checking their skills has become a big thing. We practice about two weeks before so we look as good as possible for adult CERT. It was a big change in the last four years," said Rasmussen.

For many participants, Teen CERT has sparked a professional interest in emergency management and some have used their training during actual emergencies. In Lincoln County, several students have gone on to find careers in Emergency Medical Services (EMS) or firefighting and often come back to the high schools to talk about their CERT experience. "In our Waldport High Teen CERT, the fire department there has a cadet program, so several students go into that program from Teen CERT. That's been a real successful partnership," said Graves.

"When we had a tsunami evacuation warning here a few years ago, we had some of our first group of Teen CERT students assist the fire department and go door knocking during the evacuation," said Tolan.

For other schools that are interested in starting a Teen CERT program, Graves offers two keys for success: "First, the

school admin has to buy-in and be a leader. They are key to allocating time and a schedule for the class. They have to prioritize staff, teachers, and full class period to make room in the schedule."

"Second, you must have a skilled passionate teacher that knows how to work with kids and motivate them...someone that kids will follow. It has to be someone who really believes in the topic because they pass that onto the kids. And some who know how to make leaders and followers out of kids. This was the case with both schools that have Teen CERT. The principals prioritize it, they get it, and they really see the value of the program. And teachers have to have the skills. You need a champion," said Graves.



Taft High School Teen CERT students use the chair carry to move a student during an earthquake drill.

She also stresses the power of perception among the youth and how it can impact the success of a program. “With teens, perception is reality. When starting a Teen CERT program, it’s important to be ready and do it right. If you do it half way, and it’s not a great experience, word will get around the school. These perceptions are difficult to overcome. If you invest in the time, training, and finding the right teacher, you’ll have a sustainable program that kids want to be involved with. Get resources in place so that when you start the program, you’re really doing it well.”