

Anderson County Community Emergency Response Team Gallops to Connect with Residents

It can be a bit of a setback for the community emergency response team (CERT), if members of the program don't have any natural disasters to handle. You'll at least need the occasional snowstorm, flood, tornado or wildfire – something that allows the team to serve the community.

In this part of northwestern South Carolina, the weather isn't much of a problem. Anita Donley, a public information officer and CERT program manager of the Anderson County Sheriff's office, mentioned that weather-related hazards are largely limited to winter.

"We have a tendency to get a lot of ice, more than we do snow. The biggest natural disaster is in the winter months. We don't really see as much wildfires or anything like that," she said.

Without much natural disaster activity, the Anderson County CERT was then left to get creative and principally manage non-weather emergencies: search and rescue, investigation support, and community events. Enter the Sheriff's Office.

When the volunteer program was first established – more than 10 years ago – Anderson County Emergency Services, the area's emergency management agency, oversaw CERT. At the outset, the program was more traditional. However, the program became dormant because of minimal resources and a lack of interest. That was short-lived, as the sheriff's office assumed control of the agency bringing CERT with it.



The Anderson County MSaR team conducts a search and rescue mission for a missing person.

"It was pretty dormant back in 2005, when a lot was not being done with the CERT team. Around 2006 when I took the reins, I ordered new materials and equipment. We started the classes back. We started gradually building the program back up," said Donley.

The team's funding and membership are now stable. The program primarily relies on funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and volunteer donations.

"Altogether we have 52 people within the CERT program. We try to keep the numbers in the span of control that is easy to handle. We're not a CERT that tries to make our CERT numbers look big. We have fire fighters, volunteer fire fighters. We have deputies. We have nurses. We have chaplains on our team. We have people who volunteer on our team who have backgrounds or a specialty that assist in anytime we go out on a response," said Donley.

Members' professional specialties, especially those in public safety and healthcare management, come in handy. The county CERT has an agreement with the fire department to assist them with missing children cases.

"We have an agreement with our technical rescue team – our fire department – that anytime there is a child missing that is five years old or younger or if there is a drowning call, we deploy the whole team," Donley said.

By 2011, the Anderson County CERT expanded to a mounted search and rescue (MSaR) team as a consequence of few weather emergencies and at the request of its membership. Donley said she approached the sheriff to launch the CERT offshoot program.

"We had some people in CERT that approached us, because they had horses," said Donley. Some of them were horse trainers. I approached Sheriff John Skipper in 2011 and told him it was a resource that was available to us through our volunteers."

Interest is high among the public. In fact, Donley turns prospects down to join the MSaR team. Donley, however, reminds horse owners the program is not for recreation. It has a mission.

"Day one, members and volunteers are told that this is not a riding club. This is not a social club. It's a rescue team. If they want to laugh and have a good time and are not interested in training and the real purpose, then they need to move on," Donley commented. "We actually did have some drop out, because they really wanted to have a social club and the prestige of saying they were on a mounted search and rescue team with the sheriff's office. We weeded out the people that we had to."

Those who join the MSaR team must also join CERT. And many CERT members join their mounted horse counterparts during their training, so they can get accustomed to working around horses. Donley noted that some members, who were not previously exposed to horses, didn't know that you're not supposed to walk directly behind a horse to prevent getting kicked by the horse's hoof.

"It [is] mandatory that anyone who is on the mounted search and rescue team also completes CERT basic training. Medically they need it," said Donley, listing possible scenarios that members may encounter, including cribbing and the stress a disaster or rescue may cause to the horse, the rescuer or victim. CERT cribbing training is important to the MSaR team, because the members may encounter a lost victim trapped under debris, trees, or other things.

The horses must be certified with the sheriff's office each year in order to participate. Training is quite extensive, involving 4 stages, including hobbling, horsemanship, and 2 sessions of round pen, which is a circular enclosure used for horse training. In addition, training includes going through the mountains in South Carolina and Georgia, and camping out in nearby state parks to simulate a search and rescue experience.

"Horses really don't like anything on the ground that they're not familiar with, so we'll [use] a black tarp. That's one of the biggest obstacles to try to get a horse to walk across a tarp. We have ropes and ribbons hanging down from the trees. Of course, they have to go across a creek," Donley explained.



Two Anderson County CERT volunteers search for a missing person in Pendleton, SC.

Upon satisfactory completion of horse training, the owner earns an orange jacket. An orange jacket indicates the owner can lead a team on a mission, mounted on their horse.

Mike Kinsey, an internationally renowned horse trainer, leads training. Kinsey, too, is a CERT and MSaR member. Free of charge, he offers his time and expertise to train the other members and their horses.

Even though the horses are privately owned, the sheriff's office is very involved in the care of the horses. The office performs random check-ins to ensure the horses are well-kept. The horses must have annual check-ups and current vaccinations.

The MSaR team participates in various events to publicize its activities. The team takes their horses up to Clemson University's arena to showcase the animals, but the event can also become a recruitment opportunity.

"Clemson has an arena, where they have a lot of horse shows and livestock. Sometimes we'll get inquiries from people who have more than enough training, so every now and then we'll bring people [into the program]," said Donley.

In addition to participating in the horse shows, the team gets callouts to join the sheriff's office for community events. One such event is National Night Out.

For their National Night Out – a community awareness event to highlight crime and drug prevention across the United States, this is an opportunity for the CERT and MSaR members to do more than "just focus on law enforcement." The sheriff's office brings their fleet of cars, vans, and other equipment to allow the public to personally connect with the agency. Emergency Medical Services, Anderson Police Department, and local fire departments also participate in the annual event.

Adults and children alike are allowed to sit in a police car, helicopter, and boat. The public also talks with members of the Special Weapons and Tactics Team. They can even touch and get up close to the horses.

"Our CERT members and our MSaR members are a big part of [National Night Out]. They set the tents up in the Civics Center. There's a tablet that they run for promotional videos," said Donley. "It's a very big promotional opportunity. We actually take applications [for CERT] right then and there."

Social media is also a part of the program's communications and public relations strategy. The teams engage with Anderson County residents by posting pictures and updates on Facebook.

"Our biggest way to promote the CERT and MSaR programs is through social media. CERT has their own Facebook public page. Our mounted search and rescue has their own public Facebook page," said Donley.

It may be enjoyable to interact with the fellow residents on Facebook, but there's nothing like helping to solve a crime.

Working with the investigations team, CERT members recently went out on a hunt for evidence in connection with a triple homicide. The evidence was disposed of on a 4-mile stretch road.

Engagements with the Anderson community are what make the program so meaningful.

"I think the reason I'm so proud of our CERT and MSaR team, here in Anderson County, is how proactive we are. We just don't sit around and wait for disasters to happen. We really do try to do as much as we possibly can, whether it's training or community events. You've got to keep it interesting for them or they're going to drop out and you're not going to have any kind of program for them whatsoever. Making those community interactions, the promotions and having the resources – that's what it's all about. It's about helping each other out for the greater good. Helping the community. You've got to play well together," said the CERT program manager.

Donley offers some advice to other CERT program managers. She believes it would be beneficial to expand the program into other areas to retain active members, but also for the value it brings to the community. A diverse, skilled program ultimately helps the community it serves.

"Don't just stick with emergency management. If you wait to be reactive, your volunteer numbers are going to fall because people are going to get bored waiting for a disaster to happen. You've got to continually train, and with CERT training there's just so much you can train on. You can expand your training and the knowledge that you have within your county and what your first responders can do – that's what we did," concluded Donley.

It's important that that if you want to make a difference in the community that you get in touch with all the first responder agencies, and not just disaster preparedness and emergency management.