

Dallas Community Emergency Response Team Connects with Community in Many Ways

Dallas, Texas, faces multiple severe weather threats year-round, including thunderstorms, tornadoes, flooding, and drought. Being a central transportation hub of the region, Dallas also deals with potential terrorist attacks and other man-made hazards.

To help mitigate the impact of these threats and take the heavy burden off emergency services, the City of Dallas Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) answers the call for help when the citizens are in need of service. Operating under the City of Dallas Office of Emergency Management, Cassandra Wallace, senior emergency management specialist, manages the CERT program and its active members.

Since 2007, the Dallas CERT taught 120 classes and trained thousands of people throughout the community. “We have trained close to 2,000 people, including residents, citizens, [conducted] some Teen CERT training, and [we are] also going into businesses and organizations and training them as well,” said Wallace. Some of these include Texas Instruments, the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, the Texas State Guard, FEMA Corps members, and various community colleges in the area. CERT also participates in emergency response exercises and teaches classes for hospitals, including Baylor Scott & White Hospital and the University of Texas Southwestern Hospital.

“We are probably one of the busiest programs in the North-Central Texas area, largely in part due to the size of our city and the civic opportunities that are available here,” said Wallace. “Given the size of our region and state, there are always training opportunities we are able to offer to our members. I think it is very important for them to stay interested in between disasters and that we help them to stay on top of their skills.”

The Dallas CERT approaches training in several ways. During monthly meetings, the program covers topics of interests such as crowd control, traffic control, and hazardous materials.

“A number of our members also have participated in training beyond our local training. The Texas Engineering Extension Service teaches classes in the Dallas area. We’ve had [training in] wide-area search [and rescue], and a team has gone to the Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP) in Anniston, AL, for training in HAZMAT Awareness,” said CERT Instructor Doug Frazier.

“We took close to a dozen CERT members for the HAZMAT Awareness class at CDP,” said Wallace. In addition, Dallas CERT recently participated in a FEMA tabletop exercise with the Dallas County Health and Human Services Medical Reserve Corps.

The Dallas CERT attributes some of its program’s success to various financial resources. While funding for the program comes, in part, from the State Department of Homeland Security and Urban Area Security Initiative, Dallas CERT also started its own non-profit organization. “As part of our sustainment



Prior to the Dallas Marathon, the Dallas CERT volunteers conduct a morning check-in and issue gear to their volunteers to use during the day.

plan, we recently started a 501c(3) nonprofit organization called Dallas CERT Inc. It is an auxiliary organization, and their primary goal is to fundraise and help with the Dallas CERT sustainability in the event that we are in a position where we don't receive any grant funding to sustain the program," said Wallace.

Dallas CERT Inc. is the second nonprofit organization started within the Dallas CERT program. In 2010, the Dallas CERT Northeast formed a 501c(3), which also assisted with fundraising for the organization to supplement grant funding.

Periodically, the Dallas CERT connects with area businesses to not only raise money, but to also raise awareness about the program. "We also partnered with a local restaurant that agreed to give us a percentage of their gross sales for the day. We were able to set up a table at the restaurant to pass out disaster preparedness and CERT information. The restaurant employees donned CERT gear, including helmets, t-shirts, and vests, to help advertise and help recruit for the CERT program," Wallace said.

In addition to supporting program needs, the Dallas CERT Inc. sponsored a fundraiser in 2014 to help pay medical bills for a long-time CERT instructor diagnosed with cancer. Supporting the needs of its volunteers, when appropriate, has become a priority for CERT so it can better serve the community. It also helped volunteers to feel more connected to the program.

Robust promotion is also instrumental to the success of the Dallas CERT. To promote the program within the community, CERT puts advertisements in the local newspaper, as well as small area newspapers, and provides broadcast messages to the Dallas Morning News. CERT also uses the Nextdoor mobile application to promote its activities. "It is really popular and up and coming. It brings neighborhoods together... and you are able to post different things that are neighborhood-related or announcements you want to get out to your neighbors. I've found that CERT members have used that quite a bit to announce CERT classes for us," said Wallace.



Dallas CERT volunteers check with a Dallas Police Department reserve officer to see if barriers need adjusting at the Dallas Marathon.

In some instances, promoting the Dallas CERT isn't a planned occurrence. In 2015, tornadoes struck Rowlett, TX (Dallas County) on the evening of December 26. The City of Rowlett contacted CERT programs across the region, including Dallas CERT, to provide support for the community. Wallace received a notification at midnight requesting CERT volunteers, and she emailed her team to assist. "Usually, about 80 percent of our CERT members are available and connected to email via their smartphones. We are negotiating the purchase of a volunteer management software that will have the capabilities to notify members via phone, text, or email."

By 7 a.m. on December 27, Dallas CERT had boots on the ground ready to serve. For nine hours, the Dallas CERT participated in damage assessments, joining 22 other CERTs from the region and nearly 300 volunteers who also responded to the incident. After the disaster, Dallas CERT's class registration increased by 700 percent.

“Feedback from our team before, during, and after that call out was all positive,” said Wallace. “Our CERT members were waiting for a call out like that.”

In addition to training the community and assisting with disaster recovery, the CERT program regularly volunteers with the Dallas Marathon, which hosts approximately 25,000 runners every year. CERT became involved with the race a few years back through Doug Frazier, who is also a longstanding marathon committee member. Dallas CERT provides up to 20 members to support race operations and provide first aid to runners as needed.

“We realized how vulnerable people are during the race and how much of a need there was for CERT to be involved,” explained CERT Instructor Norm Howden. “Runners routinely need help in a long race, such as recovering from a sprained ankle or hypothermia, and we have experience dealing with those issues.”

To make sure that all CERT volunteers had the essential supplies for on-the-spot triage of marathon runners, a Dallas CERT volunteer created an “event kit” to treat scrapes and minor injuries. According to Howden, military supplies and a recent high-profile active shooter event were the inspiration behind creating the kits. “We had also been exposed to the idea of the Infantry First Aid Kit, or IFAK, that the military uses. We had also been aware of the congresswoman in Arizona who was shot and the bystanders were treated by police officers who had small medical kits they carried with them in their vehicles, and some of them had trauma bandages, which are based on the Israeli bandage that can be quickly applied, and tourniquets—things that you need for that first moment of action. We started thinking about putting together kits that included those key items,” he said.



A Dallas CERT volunteer helps with runner start points at the Dallas Marathon.

In addition to the Israeli bandage, the event kits also include nitrile gloves, gauze pads, Q-tips, safety pins, alcohol swabs, Band-Aids, bandage scissors, hand sanitizer, and other necessary items. For ease of accessibility, volunteers wear the kits. “The small kits are slung over one shoulder and across the opposite waist, sort of like a messenger bag,” said Frazier.

Radio communication is also vital during the marathons. Using tactical radios on their own frequency, CERT volunteers serve as extra eyes and ears during the race to watch for suspicious activities and packages. The marathon has a central communications group with the Dallas Amateur Radio Club, composed of ham radio operators who tie into several different networks used for the marathon, and they have phone contact with the emergency command post.

“Most of us are pretty proactive,” said Frazier. “If we see something occurring, we’ll work without orders to get it taken care of expeditiously.”

Participating in the Dallas Marathon spawned the interest of other requestors for having CERT members serve as volunteers to other races in the community. Currently, CERT’s radio operators will participate in

several bicycle races later this year. Due to the overwhelming amount of requests, a Dallas CERT volunteer instructor, Dave Catlett, took the lead in creating a Concept of Operations (CONOPS) plan for participating in future marathons.

“We’ve learned that setting up proper logistics is important,” said Howden. “You have to get all the materials together and keep track of them. Accountability is a big part of our CONOPS plan, and it is expected for the CERT members to arrive with the equipment needed and to manage what they bring to the event. It is important for the volunteers to look professional when they arrive.”

Participating in city marathons has increased CERT’s interface with other Dallas organizations. Over the next year, the CERT program plans to integrate more with city departments outside of public safety to utilize the skills of their members. They plan to work with the Parks and Recreation Department staff on an up and coming Park Ranger Program for CERT members who will be eyes on the ground for what might be going on in the city parks.

“Ultimately, any partnerships we build help to expose CERT to the community at large,” said Wallace. “It increases the public’s awareness of preparedness and volunteer opportunities with the CERT program, and we are happy to be helping our citizens stay safe.”