

Irvine CERT Bonds Community with Police

Going beyond a traditional role in emergency management, the Irvine, California Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) looks to serve as the go-between for the community and police department.

“Right around when [CERT] was first founded, it was traditional. It was your basic model. People would come into the program, but there weren’t a lot of opportunities to keep people engaged,” said Commander Bill Whalen, manager of the Irvine CERT program.

Things had to change. The police department looked for opportunities to closely engage with the community. There were natural disasters that affected this southern California city, but Whalen wanted more integration for CERT, the police force, and city residents.

The Irvine program is in no way attempting to evade natural disasters in the community.

California gets its fair share of earthquakes, but most recently the lack of precipitation disrupted daily conveniences for many residents.

California Governor Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency because the Golden State went for long stretches without a drop of rainfall. This made life for Irvine CERT volunteers quite interesting. With drought, come wildfires.

“One of the predominate threats that we worry about is fire,” said Commander Bill Whalen. “Our city has wildland urban interface areas on our northern and southern boundaries. We have large amounts of open space that burns periodically. So this is something that we’re concerned about.”

But it’s the earthquakes that give Californians the biggest heartburn. Earthquakes are common in California. Many go unnoticed as the magnitude of the earthquake barely registers to residents. In December 2015, a 3.1 magnitude struck near Newport Beach – just outside Irvine, a little more than 10 miles from the city. In many parts of the country, this earthquake would make news but it’s common for Irvine residents.

“Obviously, the number one hazard is earthquakes. We spend a lot of time on earthquake preparedness,” Whalen commented. Other hazards include flooding, landslides, and the potential risk of a tsunami.

The Irvine CERT focuses many of its emergency management efforts on earthquakes. To help mitigate the impact of earthquakes and other natural emergencies, the Irvine CERT works to coordinate resources between local, state, and federal jurisdictions as well as train law enforcement, public safety, and emergency management personnel on hazard preparedness. Operating under the Office of



A CERT volunteer learns how to use an extinguisher to put out a fire as part of the program’s final exercise.

Emergency Management (OEM) within the City of Irvine Police Department, Whalen serves as the manager of the program.

The Irvine CERT also operates through a partnership with the Orange County Fire Authority. Irvine, however, doesn't have a fire department, prompting emergency management and its city fire authority to stay as a law enforcement function.

"Since we don't have our own fire department, emergency management has stayed as a city function and CERT has stayed as a city function. We're the Irvine Police Department, but we're really the Department of Public Safety, and our chief is the director of public safety. What this means is that the fire authority representative falls under the director of public safety," Whalen added.



Irvine CERT volunteers attempt to lift a trash dumpster off a mannequin as part of the program's final exercise.

The Irvine CERT and Orange County Fire Authority work closely together. Whalen

mentioned the two organizations went out on preparedness excursions, including installing smoke detectors in mobile home communities. The fire department plays a role in CERT training. The department teaches some of the program's modules, specifically the section on fire suppression.

The Irvine CERT, however, underwent several changes since its inception in 2000. When the program first started, Whalen described it as more of a traditional response team; however, there weren't many opportunities for expansion. The CERT was limited in its role. In the new structure, Whalen modeled it after an Incident Command System with four sections – Administration & Finance, Operations, Logistics, and Strategic Planning.

Whalen took over in 2011 and worked to restructure the way the Irvine CERT operated. The then-Lieutenant disbanded the volunteer leadership to centralize management and operations. Looking for ways to expand its role in the community, the CERT became more integrated with the city's police department going beyond just disaster preparedness. At the same time, the program increased its training courses to eight a year allowing the program to increase its reach. By May 2011, Whalen estimated that more than 800 residents were trained both in preparedness activities and law enforcement.

Doubling CERT training in Irvine from four to eight courses a year came easy. The chief of police was entirely supportive of the training growth. Extra staffing resources were added to handle the heavier workload. Irvine's OEM now has five staff members supporting CERT and other public safety activities.

With the increase in training, interest among Irvine residents also grew. The volunteers began to reflect the racial demographics of the community.

“Once we [increased our training capabilities], we started getting bodies in the door. CERT started to reflect the demographics of our city. If I took a picture of our CERT graduation, you’ll see every race make-up in our community. When we realized that, we started up a CERT volunteer translation corps where everybody who is bilingual is on a callout list if we have a need for non-criminal or dangerous situations,” said the Commander, highlighting the necessity for residents fluent in multiple languages due to California’s large immigrant populations.

Native languages are critical for callout missions for missing persons.

“If there is a missing person or if we found an elderly person, who walked away from home and they don’t speak English – we tried to figure out who they are, where they’re from – we have over 100 CERT members who are fluent in a second language,” Whalen remarked. And with all the languages combined, we have 35 different languages and dialects.”

The Irvine CERT can provide greater support for law enforcement and the community as a whole, because of the increased membership and greater integration with the police department.

“We blended the two missions. As a result of that, we were able to call CERT out for other things like missing people. It was one night; it became a critical missing [person]. We did a CERT callout and within an hour, I had 130 people show up to the command post. In the past, we would rely on who was in the field and pull people out of the station, but now we have 130 people. They can split off into various teams. They are already trained in how to use grid searches and how to use the radio.”

“This was the early basis of getting our CERT more involved and connected with the police department. It just grew from there. Now anytime we have a major city event, odds are we’re going to have CERT people there. They can help reunite missing kids with their parents. They can do minor first aid. All those kinds of things they’ve done now at big events,” said Whalen.

Indeed, the Irvine CERT does more than just engage in disaster preparedness and other emergency and medical-related activities. Due to the police department management, the Irvine CERT also deals with public safety and law enforcement.

Whalen specifically mentioned an ongoing public safety mission to get Irvine residents to secure their valuables, such as laptops, tablets and other electronic items that are attractive to burglars. Having a false sense of security, residents leave these expensive items unattended in cars, in plain sight of thieves. A minute or two later, their car window is smashed, and their belongings were gone.

During the afternoon and evening hours, CERT members go into their community to distribute literature, encouraging the public to avoid leaving any personal belongings, especially anything of value in their cars.

On these neighborhood-to-neighborhood calls, CERT members often find valuables left in cars. Doors unlocked. Even windows down. The CERT participants do their best to let the owners know of their personal property – and of course, distribute any public safety pamphlets.

The Irvine police department is also able to bring CERT participants in on other out-of-the-box activities. The Irvine Special Weapons Attack Team (SWAT) needed up to 40 volunteers to participate in a simulated hostage situation. As part of the SWAT training, the volunteers arrived at a movie theater and were taken as hostages.

Thanks to activities like these, excitement and participation among volunteers is fairly high. The lowest callout participation the CERT received was 75 people. It's gone as high as 130 people.

At the beginning of training, volunteers receive a CERT kit worth upwards of \$100. The duffle bag includes a CERT vest and helmet, identification card, gloves, flashlight, first aid kit, and other items.

"We give them the kit on their first day of class because they use it in various exercises. The hope is that they graduate the class. It cost \$100 a person just walking in the door. We run classes from 30 to 40 people, and offer 8 of them a year so it gets a little spendy," said Whalen.

The Irvine CERT receives funding from the city government, in its emergency management budget.

"We've been fortunate. Irvine has been a very financially secure community. Our city council, our city manager did a phenomenal job during the recession. We didn't experience a cut to any of our core services, which meant our operating budgets did not see a decrease. We were not only able to continue, but also expand during the tough years," said Whalen.

The expansion includes involving teenagers. The program teams up with a continuation high school, a school for students who struggled in traditional public schools. Approximately 20 students enroll in the program. The Irvine CERT offers both after-school and summer courses, where teenagers receive elective credits for the participation.

The curriculum for adults and teenagers is the same. The primary difference is the schedule. Whalen schedules training for the students around times that are more conducive for them, after school and in the summer. Once the students complete the course, they are paired with an adult chaperone who will take them out on callouts, including search and rescues.

The Irvine program is also hoping to develop a citizens' police academy for teenagers. Whalen believes that over time, the CERT program and teenage police academy will be folded into one.

"With us, the sky is the limit. We'll do anything we can with the police department, where we'll benefit from having extra [people]," said Whalen.

On large scale events, such as the Irvine Global Village Festival – a celebration of more than 100 musical, dance and demonstration performances, international cuisine and other cultural and religious exhibitions – the system gets tested with having to manage an estimated 20,000 people. For the Irvine CERT members, the logistical planning is no small fete.

Where are members to be stationed during the event? If certain medical or even law enforcement situations are to occur, how will they handle them? What equipment should they carry? All of these

things matter. But on the day of the event, it's less about who, what, when, where, and why. The CERT members become ambassadors of the city

"CERT is really just the mechanism. It's the vehicle to get people to connect with the police department. I think that's where we've been able to be successful," said Whalen. "We just don't look at it as strictly a CERT mission or the only things that we can do are the things that you can go online and 'google' CERT."

"People, I believe, want to be involved. People in their communities want to volunteer and be connected with their public safety agencies," said Whalen. "We just give them the opportunity to do it."