

## **Bergen County CERT Partners with Local Agencies to Strengthen Preparedness and Response**

Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) programs play an important role in helping communities prepare for and respond to disasters. To strengthen their ability to provide the highest level of disaster response, CERT program managers often seek to establish partnerships with professional responders in their communities. It is because of its strong partnership with local and county-level agencies, that the Bergen County (NJ) CERT program has made its mark in the community.

### **Beginning the County CERT Program**

Under the direction of the Bergen County Office of Emergency Management (OEM), the County established municipal CERT programs. Prior, teams existed independently in the municipalities of Fair Lawn, Paramus, and Ridgewood. In 1999, these municipalities collaborated to create a Critical Incident Task Force to improve community resilience and assist each of the County's 70 municipalities in the event of an emergency. The task force used the basic CERT training program to equip its members with necessary emergency response skills. The CERT training also provided a means to get other residents involved on a volunteer basis in emergency management.



**Members of River Vale CERT train to provide demobilization support of the Western Shelter System.**

In the early stages of the task force, each municipality brought critical emergency communications skills to the table for building community resilience across the region. For example, when a police officer was killed in the line of duty, the County requested the trained task force members to assist with field communications and provide crowd control for nearly 7,000 people who attended the officer's memorial service. Over time, the County trusted the CERT programs to provide the logistical support.

The three municipal CERT programs also introduced shelter fundamentals, a course based on American Red Cross Shelter Operations, to their members because there were no personnel in the County trained to set up and manage emergency shelters at the time. As a result, Bergen County OEM chose CERT members as the first option for setting up and managing shelters as part of their emergency operations plan. Bergen County CERT personnel train side-by-side with the Bergen County Department of Human Services. Before a shelter opens, CERT members set up cots, blankets, and other assets. Human Services notifies the American Red Cross of the shelter and the Red Cross determines whether to send a representative to manage the shelter or allow the County CERT members to operate it based on location, the approximate number of people who need shelter, and other factors.

Bergen County CERT has grown to 48 municipal teams with 2,200 active members. Each of the 48 municipal CERT programs is an independent organization, managed by an elected municipal CERT

coordinator. While their primary responsibilities are to their municipalities, the County calls on the CERT programs to work together in mutual aid calls when needed.

The 48 municipal CERT coordinators meet monthly with Bergen County OEM Division Director Thomas M. Metzler and his CERT liaison to address any issues and coordination County projects. They also work on a monthly newsletter that is sent out to all CERT-trained members and local emergency managers. The newsletter highlights team exercises and activations, and announces upcoming continuing education opportunities and CERT classes.

“The goal of the newsletter is to reinforce to the emergency management and professional responder communities that the CERT member from 1995 is not the same as the CERT member today,” said Metzler. “They are better trained, better equipped, and they have specific mission objectives just like any other responder.” The leaders of Bergen County CERT stress the importance of maintaining communication not only by engaging emergency responders and their local OEM, but also amongst the municipality CERT programs. They recognize the importance of enhancing their coordination so the county CERT programs can respond as one unit when called upon by larger emergency organizations that depend on CERT to perform at its peak. “We reinforce what they will be expected to do during call outs with quality training and hands-on exercises,” Metzler said. Across the county, more than 6,000 people have received the basic CERT training, and that number continues to grow.

### **Enhancing Relationships with County Agencies**

With established municipality teams, the opportunities to work with County agencies and first responders has increased. One example is the program’s work with the Bergen County Health Department which has initiated a response effort with CERT for a potential anthrax attack. “We have teams currently in the process of learning how to set up and pack up a medical needs shelter, including how to properly prevent blood borne pathogens and respiratory protection. In the event of an anthrax attack, Bergen Health Department depends on CERT to be able to set up and man the point of distribution of the medicines that would counteract it,” said Metzler. This plan created a sense of security among professional responders to have well-trained CERT volunteers assist if needed.

Bergen County CERT also worked to help the community recover from a flood caused by Hurricane Sandy. In response to the incident, shelter-trained CERT members set up and managed two reception centers to assist nearly 200 people and their pets who evacuated during the storm. Other CERT members performed welfare checks and oversaw a registry for people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs who were impacted by the storm and subsequent power outages.



**Members of Mahwah and North Arlington CERT, working in support of the Bergen County Department of Health Services, received training in setting up and taking down the Western Shelter System. They then lived in the system for three days.**

“We showed the town administrators, the elected officials, and residents that the CERT program has real value,” said Deputy CERT Coordinator Nelson Winneker. “We were able to take care of people that didn’t have electricity, provide them with food and water, and give them a place to warm up.”

Due to this level of trust, partnerships with County agencies and local responders increased and now Bergen County runs continuing education classes where the professionals train side-by-side with the CERT members, which Metzler says, “is the best thing that could have happened.”

CERT coordinators also work with other agencies, such as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, to provide support for hands-on trainings. From an emergency management point of view, Bergen County has a very good working relationship with the Port Authority, and they both support each other when needed. “In Bergen County, the OEM considers CERT to be first responders,” said Metzler. “There are major missions that will not be fulfilled if CERT does not come out to help, and the leaders of the Port Authority EOC know that too.”

### **Learning the Roles of Emergency Responders Through Exercises**

In October 2015, members of the Bergen County CERT program participated in a mass casualty exercise with CERT programs from Hoboken and Woodbridge, New Jersey, to support the activities of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey’s Full-Scale Exercise at Newark International Airport. Bergen County’s 12 members served as mock casualties both on the tarmac and in a full-size passenger airplane parked in a taxiway, while other commercial flights flew in and out, making the exercise more realistic.

Throughout the exercise emergency personnel provided safety briefings and stressed the importance of following instructions. By participating in the exercise, the CERT program developed even deeper connections with the Port Authority, learned how Port Authority emergency responders act and what they do, and strengthened the partnership for future exercises and callouts.

The exercise reinforced the importance of being self-reliant and helping others whenever possible. “As individual citizens, we have to become reliable enough to not only be able to take care of ourselves, but also to turn around and take care of our neighbors, whether that neighbor is on the tarmac bleeding next to you or an elderly person in need of help when a hurricane is bearing down,” explained CERT Coordinator Kevin Montana. “It really underscored one of our prime directives in self-reliance.”

### **Advice for Other CERT Programs**

As CERT members gained more experience, Bergen County’s emergency responder community welcomed CERT collaborations. For CERT programs looking to build strong relationships within the community, Winneker offers specific advice:

“Start with the municipal level. Each CERT and their leaders should be in close contact with both the municipal people who are on the police department, fire department, ambulance corps, and also the political side of it too. They have to have the support of all the different parts of each town.”

Once that support comes, it’s important to work with those agencies to leverage training disaster opportunities. Metzler says this helped CERT build trust with first responders in Bergen County. “They are looking differently at CERT members...They are looking at them as a well-trained asset able to perform a mission that has been given to them, and that’s not a bad thing!”

For more information, visit [Bergen County CERT's website](#). You can also like Bergen County's [Facebook page](#), and follow them on [Twitter](#).