

Burleigh County CERT Snow Patrol

What's the most effective way for one Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) in North Dakota to respond to a Snow Emergency? You guessed it, snowmobiles.

Imagine the wind in your face and the snow flying up behind you as you rev the engine to jump a snow drift on your way to help a stranded motorist during the next winter storm. That's what the Burleigh County Snowmobile CERT plans for with every snow storm in North Dakota.

"As far as terrain, there's nothing in this area that they can't go over top of," said Burleigh County Deputy Sheriff Tom Schroeder. "For them, the more snow, the better."

The Snowmobile CERT started in 2012, but the seed was planted during a snow storm in 2009. Back then, the Burleigh County Sheriff's Department enlisted the Rough Rider Snowmobile Association, a local club, to deliver prescription medications to senior citizens who couldn't reach the pharmacy due to the snow.

"One day it hit me," Schroeder said. "I thought why don't we do something for some type of winter response? Other than the sheriff's department, there isn't another local resource that we have."

After receiving support from the sheriff and the local emergency manager, Schroeder took the idea to the snowmobile club.

"It was wonderful," he said. "As soon as we put out the idea to the club members, I had 28 people sign up immediately. I'm proud to say that as of today, I still have all 28, nobody has left, and they've all stayed involved. In about January or February 2017, we're actually hoping to do another class and actually add about 10 more members to our team."

Their training began with the usual CERT curriculum, and they added in specifics for cold weather responses. Then they developed training scenarios and how the snowmobile team should handle them.

"We did some training on ground searches, so they can learn grid searches and patterns," Schroeder said. "With the addition of the GPS devices that we added about a year ago, that's going to help them



Burleigh County Snowmobile CERT members respond during a Snow Emergency.

out tremendously, so that they're not searching the same area twice, or too far apart or close together where it's not efficient. The GPS should increase our efficiency with searching."



Burleigh County Snowmobile CERT training

Along with different scenarios, the Burleigh County Snowmobile CERT also provides some unique equipment upon completion of the course. Rather than the standard CERT backpack, these members receive a collapsible shovel, thermal blankets, heating packs, small first aid kits, and flagging tape to mark stranded vehicles that have already been checked.

"We have now added Garmin Rhinos," Schroeder said. "They're a two-way radio, and they also have GPS. They never go alone; they go in groups of three. They carry these Garmin Rhinos with them, and if they have multiple search teams out, they can see each other on their handheld device. Not only can they talk, but they can see each other's location. We assign a group leader, and they have the communications device."

The typical deployment for the Snowmobile CERT occurs during a heavy snow storm that shuts down roads across the 1,650 square mile county. They grid out the areas and search the non-snow emergency routes for stranded vehicles.

"We start planning as soon as we hear of the storm and I get in contact with the club and give them a heads up that the storm is coming," Schroeder said. "The downside is the members are very active, a lot of times they're in Montana or Wyoming or different areas of North Dakota, so any given weekend I could be short four, five, or six guys. We take a head count to see [who's] around, and they're not deployed until the sheriff's department requests."

If they come across a stranded motorist, the Snowmobile CERT makes sure they have food and fuel. Members also carry granola bars, just in case the motorist needs an energy boost. Then they contact highway management to bring out the heavy equipment and open up a path.

"One thing we are adding this year is a rescue sled. So if we had someone [who needed to be transported], say someone with a broken leg or broken arm, we have a sled that we can pull behind the snowmobile and at least get them en-route to the medical intercept."

Even as the program continues to evolve, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recognized the Snowmobile CERT with the 2016 "Outstanding Citizen Corps Partner Program Award," part of the Agency's Individual and Community Preparedness (ICP) Awards program.

“It was a great experience,” Schroeder said. “I actually went out to Washington D.C to receive the award, and it was great to sit down with all of the people that work this from that end and a good feeling to have them want to hear our responses and ideas. It’s usually the people in DC that are on top of these programs, but they’re coming to us to make these things better, and that’s the best compliment we could receive.”

In addition to searching for stranded vehicles, the snowmobiles have been used to transport doctors and other medical professionals to hospitals in order to keep their staff fresh during a snow event. Other counties in North Dakota have heard about the CERT and have requested their services as well.

At times, there are bad snow storms in the area, so the team has had to decline requests for assistance. “We try not to go out in the night time if the wind is blowing and it’s storming out,” Schroeder said, “unless we have a specific mission to go out, where we can send...one small team [with] one goal; [the team’s] safety is the number one priority.”

The members stay engaged outside of the winter deployments with continued training. At least once a year, they conduct refresher trainings in areas such as first-aid, CPR, avalanche or ground search techniques. The next step is finding ways to activate these volunteers year-round. With warm weather events like the annual Fourth of July parade, Burleigh County officials have discussed using all-terrain vehicles to distribute bottled water to guard against heat exhaustion. They have also considered using the CERT members to assist with activities related to water and boat safety events.

“We’re going to broaden it in that way,” Schroeder said, “because if I can use the volunteers, I can keep interest from the volunteers. If they’re waiting for snow and waiting to be called, they’re going to get bored, and they’re all very involved and excited about helping the community.”

For more information on the Burleigh County CERT and its recent ICP Award, please visit www.ready.gov/citizen-corps/citizen-corps-awards.