

CaliforniaVolunteers Puts Critical Skills in CERT Member's Pockets

With a state as large as California, which has a population of almost 40 million people, it is critical to have a high level of disaster response to keep its communities safe. Programs such as Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT), which support public safety and professional responders, play a strong role in helping communities respond to and recover from emergencies and disasters.

While CERT members take basic training, depending on the community and situation, their skills may not be put to use immediately. And without taking the proper refresher trainings and consistent practicing of their skills, CERT volunteers may find themselves in a dangerous situation if called upon without having practiced those skills. After all, the CERT basic training manual isn't intended to be carried around by volunteers.

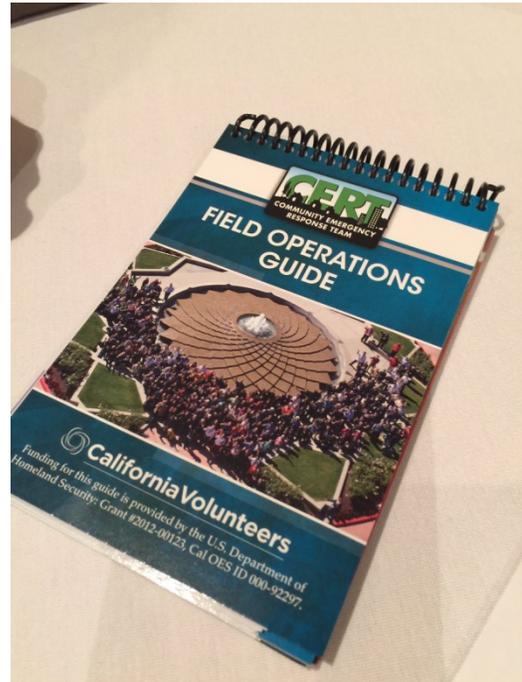
[CaliforniaVolunteers](#), part of the Office of the Governor in California, recognized this problem and set out to find a solution to ensure CERT members have the information and skills they need at their fingertips.

Conceptualizing the CERT Pocket Field Operations Guide

Responsible for volunteer coordination and donations during a disaster, CaliforniaVolunteers has also been designated by the State of California as its CERT and Citizen Corps State Administrator. Since its inception, CaliforniaVolunteers has administered 400 programs and worked with about 30 Citizen Corps Councils in the state. Realizing the need to provide its volunteers and members with critical, hands-on skills during a disaster, CaliforniaVolunteers secured a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to purchase and supply a field operations guide for the training and support of its CERT program.

CaliforniaVolunteers quickly realized that the information available in the field operations guide was outdated, and turned to the help of its CERT-advising web group, which is made up of around 20 subject matter experts throughout the state of California. This effort resulted in two options. Option one was purchasing outdated guides off the shelf to distribute to CERT members. Another possibility was working together to create a new CERT field operations guide that would meet their specific needs of providing quick and accessible information to volunteers, so that they would be better equipped to handle any situation during an emergency—rather than trying to recall training that may have occurred as much as two years prior.

Together, CaliforniaVolunteers and the CERT experts decided to create a field operations guide small enough to fit in a pants pocket, but that also compiled numerous variations in training and operations



CaliforniaVolunteers CERT Field Operations Guide

guidance and would be easy to understand and reference during a disaster. The CERT Basic Manual itself is 300 pages long, however, so figuring out what information to include in a pocket-sized guide would be no easy task. CaliforniaVolunteers spent months working with its advisors, looking through existing field operations guides to identify what information, skills, and photos to include, and how they could effectively pare it down to just the necessary material.

“We looked at what samples we already had in local jurisdictions, finding that many programs use a tri-fold brochure as a field operations guide, which is a sheet of paper front and back with the core skills, but doesn’t provide information on how to actually do the skills,” said Suu-Va Tai, Director of Volunteering and Preparedness, CaliforniaVolunteers. “So, we took the CERT basic manual, looked at the technical pieces, and started paring it down to give our advising group something to react to.”

The team came up with the core material after about one year and then turned the focus to the next goal—including pictures and diagrams of real CERT members carrying out actions in either a real situation or drill. While most CERT basic training materials are made up of mostly text and minimal photos, CaliforniaVolunteers selected more than 100 photos to include—most of which had been submitted by its volunteers to give it a real “California feel.”

“The benefit of a guide like this is volunteers can refer to the skills from training before they conduct them again,” Tai said. “Many CERT volunteers take the training one time and then may or may not participate in the annual event the county puts on, as most counties don’t even put them on or they hold them on a day when volunteers are working or have other engagements. So, if you have a pocket guide for them to use and they go out and respond to a disaster two years after their initial CERT training, they can refer to the guide to see what actions they will need to do, such as forming a fulcrum properly, for example.”

It can be difficult to read and react quickly in the middle of a disaster. The realistic images help responders figure out which skills they will need to use and how to implement them, while ensuring they remember each of the steps correctly. CaliforniaVolunteers mapped out the guide in a manner that readers can easily find which skill they are looking for, rather than flipping through hundreds of pages. They also made the pages water resistant to prevent the guide from getting soggy and ripping apart in bad weather.

Putting the Guide in the Pockets of Volunteers

The entire process of creating the pocket field operations guide took about five years to complete, from initiating the contract through printing the guides. CaliforniaVolunteers ordered enough guides to provide around 36 copies to each of the 400 CERT programs in California. By giving out the guides to the programs and letting them see how effective they could be in a disaster scenario, CaliforniaVolunteers could ensure that it was top of mind when the programs would secure grant funding, leading them to purchase more guides for their members to use.

Today, all 400 CERT programs in California have copies of the guide, and many focus on printing more each year. [QuickSeries Publishing](#), which specializes in creating pocket and e-guides, also sells a version of the guide, which has become one of the top 10 most popular guides it sells.

“Previously, program managers would give CERT members the basic manual, a backpack, and a helmet, and trusted they would remember the skills they learned in training when a disaster actually occurs,” Tai

said. “Now, they can be much more comfortable putting the guides in the hands of their volunteers, and feel like they are putting their volunteers in a much safer environment because they will have the skills they need right at their fingertips.”

The pocket guide has seen tremendous success in California, resulting in CaliforniaVolunteers winning the [2016 FEMA Individual and Community Preparedness \(ICP\) Award for Outstanding CERT Initiatives](#). The award was presented to CaliforniaVolunteers at the White House in September 2016, recognizing the organization for innovative practices and campaigns that have made outstanding contributions toward making its community safer, better prepared, and more resilient.

The Future of the Pocket-sized Field Operations Guide

For organizations looking to create their guides, Tai also has some important advice when it comes to customizing the material: “I would say don’t waste a lot of time recreating the guide as a whole, but take the core guide and add onto it based on what the local disasters in your area are,” he said. “Similar to the CERT program, you don’t want to recreate their core materials, but if the CERT program doesn’t focus on earthquakes and you are in California, you definitely add an earthquake component to your training – same thing if you are on the East Coast and want to add in a hurricane training.”

CaliforniaVolunteers is also interested in creating a digital version of the guide, which would let volunteers quickly choose which skills they need and watch videos that walk through the steps and processes of how to carry out these skills. Creating a digital version that volunteers could download into an application would also remove the effort and costs associated with printing—ensuring more and more programs have access to this important information at their fingertips.

Looking ahead, there is a planned revamp of the CERT Basic Materials in summer 2017, and CaliforniaVolunteers has also been involved in discussions with FEMA to see how they can effectively maintain the guide to keep it up to date with the latest version. For more information, check out CaliforniaVolunteer’s [website](#), [CERT program](#), and [Field Operations Guide](#).