

Columbiana County CERT Sounds the Alarm

As part of the [American Red Cross Home Fire Campaign](#), the Columbiana County Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) installed 75 smoke alarms in 45 homes last September.

The Columbiana County, OH, Emergency Management Agency (EMA) heard about the campaign last year when a local chapter of the American Red Cross discussed it during a

county emergency management committee meeting. The EMA thought it would be a great chance to engage CERT volunteers.

“We thought this would be an excellent opportunity for the CERT team [to get involved] in the community,” said Peggy Clark, Director of the Columbiana County EMA.

The CERT scheduled the smoke alarm event for a Saturday in September 2017. Local fire departments helped identify areas of concern in the county. The American Red Cross provided training to CERT members on the proper installation and paperwork required.

“It wasn’t very time consuming,” Clark said. She noted the training includes recommendations on where to install the smoke alarms. Clark said volunteers also receive a “basic overview of what you might walk into, whenever you are in somebody’s home.”

In order to receive a smoke alarm, residents need to fill out an application. The American Red Cross provides door hangers with information on how to apply. One month before the event last year, the team distributed these door hangers in the community.

“We did a pre-canvas in August,” said Debra Moore, Program Manager for the Columbiana County CERT. “The team went out to different locations. They canvassed the entire community with door hangers. We did hundreds and hundreds of those.”

The door hangers promote the campaign and help schedule appointments. CERT volunteers also called residents to gauge interest and ensure they would be home during the installation effort. Eight of the 12 CERT members participated along with two volunteers from the EMA. They broke up into four teams. Then, they went to work in different neighborhoods. Two volunteers installed the smoke alarms. The third volunteer filled out the paperwork and provided the resident with fire safety information.



Columbiana County Community Emergency Response Team

“The [American] Red Cross wanted us to give a general review of the [home’s] environment,” Moore said. “If we saw anything that looked like a potential fire hazard, like boxes of paper sitting on an electric heater, they wanted us to mention that it might be considered a fire hazard. There was a good bit of interaction in that regard.”

The teams found several homes with potential fire hazards. Some homes had clutter around heating elements. Others had narrow exits. One had mattresses piled up in front of doors.

“We did identify a lot of really concerning areas,” Moore said. “Hopefully, they followed up with our recommendations.”

CERT members spent extra time at one home where a hallway leading to children’s bedrooms was blocked by clutter. They installed smoke alarms around the children’s rooms. They also talked to the parents about clearing the exits.

“That was one where, hopefully, we had an impact,” Moore said. “Our team members were so passionate about making sure all the children were protected. That is something that stood out. They really watched out for the children and the children’s bedrooms, and they were very dedicated.”

The American Red Cross included whiteboards with magnets in their materials. The CERT members asked residents to use the whiteboards to develop a fire escape plan for their home. Then, hang it on their refrigerator – a spot where all family members will regularly see it.

“That was good,” Moore said. “The people liked that, especially the kids. We also had some emergency safety coloring books that we gave out to children.”

After installing 75 smoke alarms last September, the EMA now recognizes the need for more of these events.

“Since our initial installation day [last year], the [American] Red Cross received many more applications,” Clark said. “We are just waiting for the weather to break to go out and do it again.”

The Home Fire Campaign gives CERTs a chance to engage volunteers in an easy to manage event. It highlights CERT capabilities to help an entire community prepare for a disaster. The activity serves as a possible recruiting tool. This allows for a greater understanding of what CERT does. It also lets individuals know how to volunteer. Interacting with members of the community is an important role for any CERT. It shows how neighbors help neighbors prepare for, respond to, and recover from an emergency.

FEMA encourages CERTs across the country to ‘sound the alarm’ and join this worthwhile campaign. Visit the [Columbiana County EMA](#) for more on the CERT. To participate in future Home Fire Campaign events, please visit <https://www.redcross.org/sound-the-alarm> or read FEMA’s [article on helping the American Red Cross and CERT Sound the Alarm!](#)