

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell Delivers Speech at National CERT Association Conference

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I am so happy to be with you today as I have truly been looking forward to this event!

Many thanks to President Suu-Va Tai and our leaders at the National CERT Association for inviting me to speak today, and to the amazing team who worked hard behind the scenes to host this conference!

When I look across this room, I see some of the most dedicated, hardworking, and genuine emergency managers this country is so fortunate to have. When I say hard working, I mean it. Because, for many of you, this is a second, or even third job.

You chose to volunteer your time and effort to one of the most noble causes there is, helping your fellow neighbors both prepare for disasters, and navigate their recovery when the skies clear.

On behalf of all of us at FEMA, and the nation, we thank you. We thank you because your passion for keeping your communities safe is inspiring and infectious. Because your ability to recognize your communities' unique needs and establish chapters dedicated to those causes is innovative and creative.

My deep respect for the CERT mission began during my time in Aurora, Colorado. It is actions like these that serve as a testament to CERT's evolution since 1985. Now, I am not here today to preach FEMA's programs, or give you a lengthy briefing on all that we are doing. I am here to recognize what you are doing –to recognize the impact you have on those you serve.

You bring together the partners. You steer the ship through the first few hours of a disaster. You staff the shelters and find the food, so no one goes hungry. You are



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the first ones in and the last ones out. You stay to finish the job during the many, many months of recovery.

I know many of us at FEMA have experience working directly with CERTs and I can tell you that we all would say the same thing: We simply cannot meet our mission without you. The CERT movement has provided us with well-trained volunteers who are the extra hands and hearts for the work we do.

You engage an intricate network of community partners to remove barriers to response and recovery. And as our eyes and ears on the ground, you give us valuable insight into how we can tailor our assistance in a way that meet's a community's unique needs. Because of all this and more, I truly hope that one day CERT becomes a household name, because what you do matters. As I said earlier, I am here today to recognize you, and now, I have a few special people I would like to highlight for their incredible efforts.

But before I get to that, I want to recognize the Tribal Nations with us today to include:

Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal Nation, San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate of Lake Traverse Reservation, Osage Nation, and the Cherokee Nation.

We know some of the most unique challenges before, during, and after disasters are felt by Tribal Nations. That is why, I would like to recognize and thank the tribes here today as your efforts are so incredibly important to building disaster resilience in your communities.

I will briefly mention that FEMA is celebrating a significant milestone today with the release of our first -ever National Tribal Strategy. We worked very closely with Tribal Nations on this Strategy, and we are confident that it will strengthen the delivery of our mission to Tribal Nations and help advance the emergency management profession, nationwide.

Now, I have a few special people I would like to recognize, and if they aren't too shy, I am hoping they will join me on stage after I share a little bit of their story.

Let me start by recognizing Harold Tiger Wiconi Wawokiya. I understand that Harold has carried many titles throughout his career, but none as consequential



as his Lakota name which translates to “Helper of Life.” Harold has worked in the Emergency and Disaster Preparedness arena for over 30 years, as practitioner, instructor, and collaborator. He has expanded his reach beyond his own community to help others get CERT trained and certified within their tribal lands throughout the Northern Plains. Let’s give Harold a round of applause!

Next, I would like to recognize Jennifer Pfannstiel, a New Braunfels CERT volunteer from right here in Texas. I am recognizing Jennifer today for her exemplary leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. While deployed to the New Braunfels Covid Emergency Operations Center, she led her team through over 20,000 volunteer hours and helped nearly 2,000 people a day across 25 Covid walk through clinics. And after serving as a CERT volunteer for 11 years, she finally made it to her first CERT conference! Let’s give Jennifer a round of applause!

Next, I would like to recognize Jay Royster, President and founding member of the Apex CERT in North Carolina. As a Paramedic, Jay is passing on a wealth of medical knowledge to his CERT students as well as his expertise in wilderness search and rescue. Because of Jay’s efforts, Apex CERT represents the only search and rescue team in North Carolina whose members are all CERT-trained. Jay also serves as dedicated CERT spouse who has supported his wife in her role for over nine years by traveling across the nation to help prepare other CERT volunteers to do their best work. Let’s give Jay a round of applause!

Next, I would like to recognize the members of the LISTOS Program from Santa Barbara, California.

LISTOS is a passionate program focused on building sustainable relationships and partnerships with local businesses, community leaders, and non-profit organizations. In doing so, LISTOS provides valuable and culturally competent disaster preparedness information to Latino Spanish-Speaking communities, while simultaneously helping those same populations become familiar with public services available to them. The LISTOS program’s success is due to the passionate volunteers that value the importance of doing good for others and the community, and this is something we can all celebrate. Let’s give the LISTOS team a round of applause!



Next, I would like to recognize Nancy Smith who is the CERT program manager for the City of Boston Mayor's Office. With 21 years of Public Health Service to her fellow Bostonians, Nancy has been a long-time ambassador of promoting Whole Community efforts while keeping diversity, equity, and inclusion at the center of her mission. By co-developing Boston's "Get Ready, Be Safe, Stay Healthy" program, Nancy was able to establish the strongest Access, Functional and Needs Component (AFN) in the City's history. Reflective of 14 languages including Braille, Large Prints, and MP3, this program provided staff and Medical Reserve Corps Volunteers with the resources they needed to effectively engage all members of the community and bring meaning to the term Whole Community. Let's give the Nancy a round of applause!

Last, but not least, I am proud to recognize Suu-Va Tai, President of the National CERT Association. When you think about CERT, the passion and commitment of Suu-Va Tai comes to mind. Known for his tireless advocacy of CERT's mission, Suu-Va is not only putting CERT on the map nationally, but globally, too. With a professional career that spans the full scope of our profession – from emergency manager to volunteer, helping people before, during and after disasters is simply what he was born to do. I cannot think of a better person to lead our National CERT Association and I know many of us in this room agree. Let's give the Suu-va a round of applause!

Aren't those some incredible stories?

The CERT members in this room, across the nation, and around the world represent a diverse and caring community that make this world a better place to live. A world safer for our future generations.

So, my call to action for you is this: Keep doing what you're doing, preach the CERT mission far and wide, and help us build stronger, more prepared, and more resilient communities nationwide.

Remember, your mission is our mission. Your passion is our passion. You have our backs, and we have yours. So, as they say, let's go forth and do great things.

Thank you!

