

Community Emergency Response Teams: From Disaster Responders to Community Builders

By Courtney Flint and Mark Brennan

In brief...

Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) – local residents trained as first responders to natural disasters – can also be used to help build community capacity before disasters strike.

The CERTs framework for pulling together localities to prepare for disasters can also be mobilized to focus attention on other pressing issues in local areas.

In communities with less capacity, CERT programs can provide a roadmap for how people and organizations can organize themselves to address important local issues and challenges

To be effective in developing community capacity, CERTs must:

- Involve diverse groups of residents and ensure balanced community representation
- Get back to basics – CERTs have lately focused almost exclusively on major natural disasters and terrorist acts. However, they were originally designed to respond to a variety of local emergencies and serve as a broad-based conduit for community development and civic engagement.
- Update training: Community development and civic engagement training should be the cornerstone of all CERT programs
- Expand the view of what constitutes a disaster: rapid economic decline or environmental change can also be disastrous for rural areas

The federal government should:

- Re-evaluate the role and position of FEMA and the CERT Program within the Department of Homeland Security
- Re-evaluate the 2000 Disaster Management Act in light of rural community vulnerability

As the Gulf Coast hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 made abundantly clear, rural communities are often left on their own to meet the emergency needs of local residents. This is increasingly true in an age when the federal government frequently cedes control to state and local jurisdictions. Although this new responsibility opens the possibility for greater community involvement in local planning, not all communities have the capacity to meet these new obligations. Rural communities often find themselves doing more with less. This imbalance is perhaps no more evident than during a natural disaster.

However, a new approach – the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program – shows promise, not only for disaster response, but also as a tool for building community capacity.¹ Based on the concept of neighbors helping neighbors, the CERT program trains local volunteers as first responders to emergencies. CERTs, which are administered

A Word About the CERT Program

The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Program educates people about disaster preparedness for hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations. Using the training learned in the classroom and during exercises, CERT members can assist others in their neighborhood or workplace following an event when professional responders are not immediately available to help. CERT members also are encouraged to support emergency response agencies by taking a more active role in emergency preparedness projects in their community.

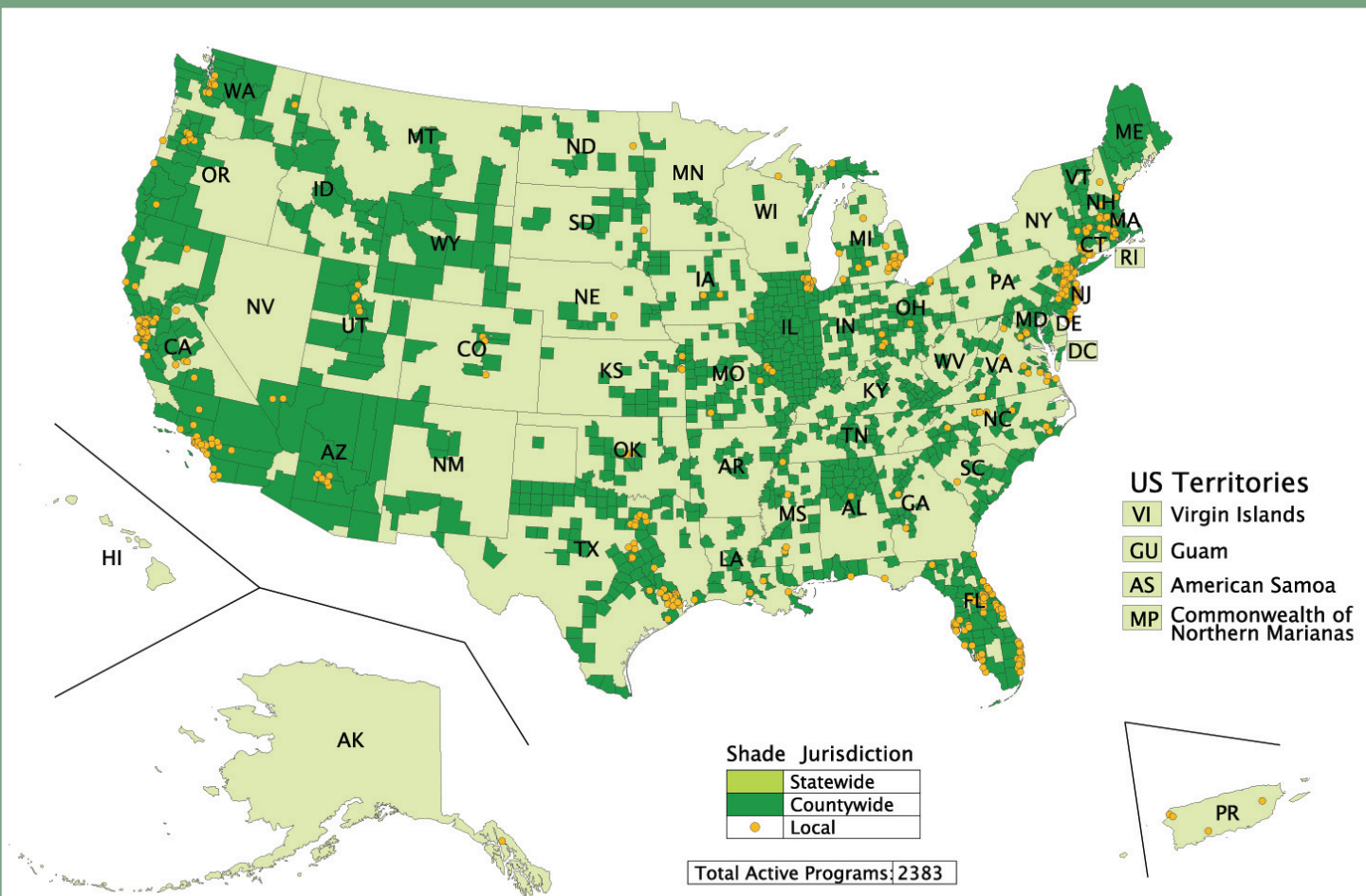
by Citizen Corps and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), blend a bottom-up appreciation for the role of local volunteers with a top-down institutional framework for training and coordination.

Although promising, if the CERT program is to be effective, it should be adaptable to different levels of local capacity and should broadly represent the citizenry it is intended to protect and serve. This brief explores CERT's role both in helping rural communities prepare for disaster and in building sustainable capacity in those communities. If CERT is to achieve its potential as a tool for community-capacity building, it must re-embrace its original focus on long-term preparedness and sustainability, promote broad-based community participation, and revamp its training materials to focus on developing community and civic engagement. At the federal level, community disaster management must move beyond the current emphasis on terrorism and national security, and current disaster policy must provide funds and expertise to rural communities in disaster mitigation planning.

Disaster Policy Shifts to Local Control

Local communities are less often seen today as helpless victims needing outside assistance. In fact, local involvement and community capacity are increasingly recognized as a vital first line of defense in disaster mitigation, response, and recovery. The Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000, which requires local and tribal governments to submit action plans to reduce long-term risk, essentially shifts the burden of disaster preparedness to local control, although not without some federal financial assistance. However, access to federal planning

Map 1: CERTs Currently in Operation in the United States, as of October 2006



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Source: CERT and Citizen Corps.

Retrieved from <http://www.citizencorps.gov/citizenCorps/certsByState>

funds is linked to compliance with these requirements. The National Response Plan, established by the Department of Homeland Security in December 2004, also emphasizes local response to emergencies – by local police, fire, medical personnel, and other responders – and specifies that responses be handled at the lowest possible organizational and jurisdictional level. Federal involvement is outlined for cases when an incident exceeds local and state capabilities. However, as the 2005 hurricane season underscored, disaster policy

and response frameworks must be bolstered to better support the role of local communities.

Community Emergency Response Teams

The CERT program emerged from a growing appreciation for local participation. The first CERT appeared in Los Angeles in 1985 when city officials and the Los Angeles Fire Department modeled a disaster program on the Japanese tradition of involving local residents and volunteers in training

drills. San Francisco Bay Area communities began adopting CERT programs around the time of the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989. After Hurricane Andrew in 1992, Orlando adopted the CERT approach, and FEMA also began developing standardized training materials and facilitating training programs. The CERT program expanded

greatly after 2001. According to Citizen Corps in October 2006, 2,383 CERTs were in operation across the United States (see Map 1).

CERT training focuses primarily on first aid and triage, logistics and communication, search and rescue, and team organization (Table 1). The

Table 1. CERT Training Materials and Incident Plans, and Recommended Areas for Expansion

Current Activities

CERT Training Modules

- Disaster Preparedness
- Fire Safety
- Disaster Medical Operations
- Advanced Disaster Medical Operations
- Light Search and Rescue Operations
- CERT Organization
- Disaster Psychology
- Terrorism and CERT
- Disaster Simulation

Specific Incidents Covered in the CERT Plans

- Earthquake
- Fires and wildfires
- Floods
- Excessive heat
- Hurricanes and coastal storms
- Landslides and mudflows
- Severe thunderstorms
- Tornadoes
- Tsunamis
- Volcanoes
- Winter storms
- Nuclear power plant emergencies
- Hazardous materials incidents

Proposed Areas for Future CERT Training

1. Key Components of Local Community-Building:

- The role of local institutions
- The nature of community leadership
- The demographic and economic complexion of the community
- Community and economic development strategies

2. Building Broad-Based Citizen Involvement:

- Uncovering the community-building assets of local people and organizations
- Leadership development
- Expanding voices through public deliberation
- Effectively managing community conflicts

3. Responding to Local Economic and Environmental Disasters

4. Addressing Rapid Growth/Decline of Diverse Populations

5. Local Participation in Environmental and Natural Resource Risk Mitigation:

- Opportunities for volunteer involvement with land management agencies
- Voluntary assistance with environmental monitoring

volunteers become official auxiliaries of local emergency management services. In some cases, CERTs are administered at the county level with a top-down approach and organization. In other cases, these teams grow from neighborhood and community initiative, with more local control over organization and responsibilities.

Rural CERTs: Expanding Possibilities

Many of the country's rural areas are characterized by poverty, the exodus of younger skilled residents, and lower levels of educational attainment, all of which shape the capacities of local communities to respond to and rebuild after disasters. If used effectively, CERTs can help rural areas that are under social and economic stress respond more effectively to disasters by building capacity before disaster strikes. The CERTs framework for pulling together localities to prepare for times of need also can be mobilized to focus attention on other pressing issues in local areas. In rural communities that are well prepared for disaster, the existing networks, infrastructures, and alliances can be refocused on economic development or other community improvement projects. In communities with less capacity, CERT programs can provide a roadmap for how people and organizations can organize themselves to address important local issues and challenges. As the instructor guide for the CERT training materials states, "(O)rganized grassroots efforts may be more successful if they are woven into the social and political fabric of the community."

Balanced Community Representation is Crucial

For CERTs to be effective in rural communities, their membership must represent the entire local

population and effectively tap local talent and expertise. Drawing together diverse groups not only provides resources and experiences, but more important, it creates transparency in the local decision making. To be effective, CERTs should include residents with professional and trade skills for damage control and assessment (e.g. engineers, environmental scientists, architects, contractors, and skilled laborers), disaster preparedness and response training (for example, VFW, retired military, national guard, or police), medical, psychological, and social service delivery experience (for example, health practitioners, counselors, religious and civic groups) and long-time residents who have witnessed previous responses to natural disasters. At the same time, the demographic diversity of the community – its race, ethnic, age, and economic richness – must also be duly represented on the local CERTs.

Tapping CERT Potential in Rural Montana

Out here in rural Montana, if we get a wildfire or a flood, we will be on our own for a long time. CERT is about learning to take care of ourselves and each other. The challenge is figuring out how to keep the volunteers involved over time between emergencies.

**– Art Koenig, CERT Coordinator
Musselshell County, Montana**

The mission of Musselshell County CERT Program is to engage the abilities of individuals through education, training, and volunteer service to make communities safer, stronger, and better prepared to respond to the threats of terrorism, crime, public health issues, and disasters of all kinds. The program tailors activities to the community and builds on community strengths to develop and implement a local strategy for individual participation.

By mobilizing and engaging a broad-based group of people and organizations, CERTs can build stronger ties among a variety of local people and organizations, as well as facilitate the development of positive linkages with external resources that can help in times of need. As such, they can play two complimentary roles -- prepare for and respond to disasters, and contribute to rural well-being by engaging in broader rural development initiatives. Building relationships in quiet times creates a valuable network and sense of community to call on in times of emergency or disaster.

Policy Suggestions

Local residents are present long before and long after disaster. Effective policies to help build broader community capacity beyond disaster planning are essential in reducing vulnerability in rural communities. The following policy suggestions would help to support CERTs in developing or expanding this capacity, with the added value of creating healthier communities in the long term.

Re-evaluate the Role and Position of FEMA and the CERT Program within the Department of Homeland Security.

Community disaster management must move beyond the current emphasis on terrorism and national security. The CERT program is currently administered by FEMA and Citizen Corps under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), where its focus risks being overshadowed by a strong emphasis in DHS on terrorism. Although national coordination of CERT is important – and the appointment of a new national CERT coordinator is promising – developing CERT guidelines at the state level would provide oversight that is more in line with regional, environmental, and institutional contexts. For example, see the Vermont

CERT guidelines at <http://www.dps.state.vt.us/vem/cert/>.

Re-evaluate the 2000 Disaster Management Act in Light of Rural Community Vulnerability

Current disaster policy, under the Disaster Management Act of 2000, calls for all communities in the country to establish disaster mitigation plans. However, mandating disaster planning as a prerequisite for receiving federal disaster funds may severely disadvantage some of the most vulnerable communities, particularly in rural areas. It would be better to provide funds and expertise to rural communities in disaster mitigation planning. Consciously integrating local, state, and federal disaster planning, personnel, and infrastructure can better facilitate disaster mitigation efforts in rural America.

Get Back to Basics

- **Re-emphasize the original mission**

CERT and other such programs have evolved in recent years to focus almost exclusively on major natural disasters and terrorist acts. However, CERTs were originally designed to respond to a variety of local emergencies and serve as a broad-based conduit for community development and civic engagement. Future policy and program development efforts would do well to recognize the original purpose of these teams and work to keep CERTs together and active over the course of the long time spans between disasters.

- **Underscore the mission with training**

Training programs could be a valuable instrument to facilitate continued community involvement of CERT participants. In fact, community development

and civic engagement training should be the cornerstone of all CERT programs, including training in asset mapping, assessing local power structures, conflict resolution skills, management methods, and community demographic/economic profile development. Training activities could be provided by Extension educators who are part of each state's land-grant university system, community college faculty, or by other community development educators. Such training could relay to citizens that their involvement is essential to local development well beyond times of disaster.

- **Reinforce the mission**

Changes to CERT program descriptions and language would also reinforce a broader mission for CERTs. Program descriptions should stress that a first step in being ready to respond to emergencies is building local capacity for change. These changes would return attention to the enormous local impact that CERTs can have.

Ensure Broad-Based Participation

As noted in an earlier section of this brief, to be effective, local CERT teams must reflect the local population. CERT training materials should guide communities in ensuring representative participation. Without such efforts, select groups might be excluded, ignored, and eliminated from decision making. Such exclusions are particularly detrimental in times of severe disaster. In these dire conditions, strong, comprehensive networks are vital to quick and efficient response.

Steps to ensure broad representation include canvassing multiple community groups (formal and informal) to encourage participation, and adding an additional CERTs training unit on community capacity-

building, asset mapping, and the importance of including diverse community residents and groups.

Expanding Our View of What Constitutes a Disaster

CERTs can provide a variety of services and increase local capacities to respond to disaster. They can also do more. To effectively expand their focus, we must first expand our view of what we consider disasters. Emergencies and disasters take many forms. Hurricanes and floods are the most recent vivid examples. However, disasters in the form of rapid economic decline or environmental change (drought, forest fires) may have equally detrimental effects on rural life and well-being. CERT programs offer the potential to help communities respond to nontraditional disasters and to directly shape local capacity for rural development.

Closing Thoughts

Regardless of the type of disaster facing rural communities, building local capacity prior to disaster is key, both to the effectiveness of the response and to the ability to bounce back after disaster strikes. Where there is local capacity, CERTs will flourish and provide critical disaster response skills and organization for recovery. By building local structures, networks, and effective communication through community-capacity training, CERTs can also contribute broadly to local life. Such efforts could have a dramatic effect in vulnerable rural communities with an eye to simultaneously developing a sense of community among residents while addressing specific disaster risk mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities.

Such a vision is by no means idealistic or utopian. Communities that are well organized, broadly

connected, and have the capacity to act, will be able to prepare, respond, and recover far more quickly. Most important, the path that these communities take will be a product of the vision, ingenuity, and hard work of local people, not ones mandated by external parties. In the final analysis, locally driven activities are the only way to truly advance the long-term vitality of these local places.

Endnote

1. Community capacity refers to the ability of a diversity of people, formal organizations, and informal groups to work together in tackling the important challenges affecting their communities.

Additional Resources

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