

Organizing Community Emergency Response Programs for Lasting Success

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Introduction

To establish a useful citizen based emergency response program for your community takes more than putting a large number of people through a CERT training class.

A program that is useful and successful over the long term needs to provide a framework for citizen disaster response that includes operational plans, communications, ongoing trainings and exercises, and a management structure to keep it all going.

While this may sound like a daunting and expensive task, it can, if well designed, be a program that is largely run by the citizens with a very modest cost.

One of the keys to a successful program is to establish an ongoing process that will continue to be interesting and challenging to the core group of interested citizens. Supported and treated well, this core group of citizens will take the program in hand and insure its long-term success and continued improvement.

The ultimate goal of the program is to have in place the plans, supplies and people to provide an effective initial disaster response at the neighborhood level.

Only a relatively small percentage of the population will chose to participate prior to a disaster. But if you provide them with good training, operational plans, and materials, they will be able to direct the spontaneous response by the much larger percentage of citizens that did not choose to participate in the program until the disaster actually occurred.

This paper is a discussion of some of the key points that have led to the success of the Citizens Emergency Response and Preparedness Program (CERPP) in the Woodside Fire Protection District. The CERPP program has been active since about 1996 and has won numerous awards as an exemplary program.

Divide the community along existing boundaries.

Where possible, use the boundaries of existing neighborhood associations and homeowners organizations.

Make a map. Assign the divisions sequential numbers and names.

Identify a leadership team that lives within each division. Ideally a leadership team should consist of about 3 to 7 people.

Divisions may wish to subdivide into neighborhoods or blocks with identified neighborhood leaders and pre-established neighborhood staging locations.

Division Leadership Roles:

Non-Disaster

- Focal point for neighborhood level disaster preparedness and response
- Increase neighborhood participation
- Develop disaster response plans within the division
- Organize local recruiting and training events
- Manage local disaster supplies

Disaster

- Establish the Division Operation Center
- Initiate communications with the local government EOC
- Initiate communications with their neighborhood groups
- Collect, prioritize, and relay situation status and incident reports
- Provide direction and organization to spontaneous volunteers

Establish a management and oversight structure for the organization

Board of Directors

Members – membership should be drawn from the division leadership teams, committee participants and members of the community

Advisory Members – advisory members could include representatives of town government, police dept. fire dept., county office of emergency services, etc.

The board's role is to set overall policy and direction for the organization. The board should be responsible for appointing the chair and vice-chair position of the working committees. The board should be responsible for the financial aspects of the organization including, spending, accounting, fund raising, budgeting, etc. The board should meet regularly. Working committees should provide the board with status reports at these meetings.

Working Committees

Much of the initial work to get the organization started and almost all of the ongoing, effort will come from a collection of working committees. It is recommended that each committee have a chairperson and a vice-chairperson in order to share some of the committee management responsibilities and to provide back up in case of absence or departure. It is also recommended that a policy be established for rotating the chair and vice-chair position every one to two years. This rotation serves to bring fresh ideas to the forefront on a regular basis, helps to prevent burn out of dedicated volunteers, and provides a mechanism to weed out non-performers.

The individual committee roles are described bellow. These rolls are all non-disaster roles. During a disaster, everyone is functioning at the neighborhood and division levels and thus the committees have no disaster response role.

Program Coordinator

Having a paid staff person is an extremely valuable asset to the ongoing success of the program, even if the program coordination roll is only a small portion of their overall job description.

Some of the valuable services that a paid coordinator can provide are:

- Single point of contact, for citizens, town staff, and CERT members.

- Regular office hours, available phone, fax, and email

- Knowledge of the program and it participants

- Ability to refer inquiries to the right person

- An interface for the working committees and division leadership teams, into town, police and fire dept. staff

- Keeper of the calendar, and able to assist in securing meeting locations

Working Committees

Operations & Planning

The initial task for this committee is to establish a model operational plan for divisions and neighborhoods to use. A basic outline for such a plan is provided below.

On an ongoing basis this committee is responsible for designing and holding regular disaster exercises, and providing for an ongoing and interesting collection of training classes. See bellow for more information on trainings and exercises. The committee is also responsible for ongoing maintenance of the basic disaster response plans.

The committee should also organize regular meetings for the division leadership teams. CERPP meets with our Division Leadership Teams quarterly. These meetings provide an opportunity for the leadership teams to support each other as well as to receive targeted training.

Logistics

The logistics committee is responsible for the physical stuff that the organization has put into place for use during a disaster and for its ongoing maintenance and replacement.

In the initial startup of the organization the committee will be working to determine what kind of disaster supplies should be pre-positioned, where they should be placed, how they are stored, who has access to them, and how they should be utilized during a disaster.

Disaster supplies caches can be big 40' shipping containers serving several divisions or collocated with potential shelter sites, Or, on the small end, small plastic garden sheds serving a block, or neighborhood.

The logistics committee should retain some oversight of the larger caches, however an effort should be made to have the divisions they serve take the majority of the responsibility for their ongoing care.

Obviously the Logistics Committee needs to work closely with the other committees to coordinate each committee's logistical needs.

Communications

Good communications is always a critical resource in disaster response. And it is complicated by the fact that many of the day-to-day communications systems we use are not likely to function well following a catastrophic disaster.

Your program will likely need at least two levels of communication networks, tactical communications within a division, and a command link between division operations centers and the Town's emergency operations center.

Division level tactical communications needs to be a two-way radio "walkie-talkie" sort of system that provides two-way voice communications between teams of citizens and their division operations center. Ideally channels can be allocated to minimize interference between divisions. Options for these systems include FRS/GMRS/MURS radio service radios. At this level you want to avoid radio services that require individual licensing. Thus either no-license services or group-license services are the best choices.

Command level communications between the division operations centers and the Town's EOC can be well served by a two-way radio type system, however it is also worth investigating mesh based wireless data technologies.

Choosing to use data vs. voice has a number of benefits and a few drawbacks. The quantity of information that can be sent is vastly increased, and the information is forced into a written format early in the process, which often aids in preserving message accuracy. Additionally it becomes possible to impose data formats by way of standard forms. The drawback is a data based system will require computer familiarity. Older users may balk at being required to use a computer-based system. Choosing to establish a

data based system is cutting-edge, and not well established and thus carries some of the risks associated with leading edge systems.

Amateur (ham) radio operators are an excellent resource and may be able to provide the necessary technical expertise for this committee. It is important that they be open to looking beyond the amateur radio service for potential solutions.

Medical

The medical committee is tasked with making plans to provide post disaster medical care. Committee membership should include people with all levels of medical training, ranging from basic first aid, to EMTs, paramedics, nurses and doctors.

San Mateo County is currently in the process of forming a Medical Reserve Corps, which may help to solve some of the more advanced level care issues. Neighborhoods and divisions should be trained and equipped to provide BLS level first aid, immediately following a disaster.

Animals

Recent disasters have reminded us that many people consider their pets to be members of their family. They may place themselves at risk or fail to heed evacuation notices if their animals cannot be accommodated.

The animals committee should work out plans for care, feeding and shelter of the types of animals found in your community. [The group in La Honda has done some really good work here and would be a useful contact] The plan may include transportation, pre-identified sheltering locations, supplies, and veterinary care.

The committee will have an ongoing role of maintaining and updating the plan, working with logistics to keep supplies current, and ensuring that the animal component of the plan gets tested in some of the exercises.

Usually it is not difficult to find passionate animal lovers willing to participate on this committee.

Publicity

Establishing and maintaining public awareness of your organization is an ongoing task. The committee has three basic goals

1. Name recognition. Even if a community member takes no steps to prepare for a disaster much less to participate in the disaster response program, if they have a basic awareness of the program they are much more likely to trust their neighborhood leaders and work with them during a disaster. (Think how red cross workers benefit from this type of basic awareness.)
2. Encourage people to make family and individual disaster preparations, including a family communications plan, and emergency kits at home and in the car.

3. Encourage participation in the ongoing training program and the neighborhood based exercises.

Initially the committee will want to establish contacts with the local media, and to figure out other methods to spread the message. The committee should consider, banners and sign boards, community bulletin boards, email lists, establishing a web site, new resident welcome kits, etc. Publicity can be done at both a community wide level, and also at the division and neighborhood level.

Basic Disaster Response Plan for Division and Neighborhoods

1. Check you own family and home. Provide assistance as required. Shut off utilities to damaged buildings as needed. Communicate status with family members that are away from the home.
2. Check on your immediate neighbors. Provide assistance as required. Shut off utilities to damaged buildings as needed.
3. Join with your neighbors to solve the most pressing problems in your neighborhood. You may be performing some of the following tasks:
 - a. Shutting off utilities for damaged structures to prevent further damage
 - b. Providing first-aid to people that have been injured
 - c. Helping elderly or ill neighbors to check and secure their homes
 - d. Helping people that are trapped in their homes to get out
 - e. Suppressing small fires and attempting to limit the spread of larger fires
 - f. Clearing roads and street that are blocked
 - g. Marking safety zones around hazards
 - h. Performing a quick damage survey or a more detailed damage assessment
 - i. Helping to feed or shelter people that have been displaced from their homes.
 - j. Providing child care for neighborhood children
4. A Division's Operations Center should activate and perform the following tasks
 - a. Rapidly establish an overall situation status
 - b. Identify the most serious problems, and where possible direct resources to solve those problems.
 - c. Report both the overall situation status and the most serious incidents to the Town's EOC.

Trainings

One of the first training classes you will want to develop is an "Introduction to the CERT Program" class. (It really more of a recruiting program than a class.) Structure it to be something that can be presented in about an hour, in someone's living room. Be willing to teach it many times, as individual neighborhoods want to learn about the CERT program and get more involved. We have found that teaching the class in the neighborhood at someone's home in a social environment, will attract people that would

never consider coming to the same class taught on a community wide basis. On the other hand, we don't shy away from also teaching the class on a community wide basis.

The basic class outline includes

1. The risk, where we paint a picture of the likely catastrophic disasters
2. The need for a citizen level response when traditional emergency services are overwhelmed
3. The basic preparedness steps that families and individuals should take
4. What the CERT framework provides and what a citizens level response would look like
5. Next steps for your neighborhood

Many of the trainings you will want to offer already exist. The materials are readily available and in some cases other organizations will put them on for you. All you will need to do is organize the class, publicize it and supply the willing students.

Other classes will need to be more tailored to your community and its specific operational plans.

Refer to the CERPP Personal Training Passport for more information on some of the available training.

Members of your operations & planning committee should make contact with surrounding community programs and attend some of their training in order to seek out fresh training ideas and to learn about new training resources.

Exercises

Exercises are fun. They build confidence in the neighborhood groups, and they demonstrate that the plans work.

Exercises are typically two to three hours long and are done as a neighborhood team. We've had success scheduling exercises on Saturday mornings and Friday evenings. We often provide suggestions for a range of different levels of participation, from a simple kitchen table paper based exercise, up to hands on scenarios with neighborhood teams outside in their neighborhoods solving simulated problems.

We run two exercises a year, in the spring and the fall. We alternate between an earthquake and a wildland fire scenario.