

CREATING COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS (CERT) IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

BY CONNIE TILLMAN

Businesses are facing increasing challenges today from threats of terrorism and manmade and natural disasters. Corporate leaders are inundated with information and choices on how to prepare their businesses against these disasters. As President Obama declared, “Preparedness is an essential element of a resilient and secure nation. My administration has made preparedness a top priority.”

Background

Organizations must pick from a quagmire of preparedness choices as they decide what is a good fit for their business. One increasingly attractive approach is to develop Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) in the private sector. The CERT approach is not a new or novel idea. First responders (in the public sector) have employed the CERT philosophy for years and are the biggest proponents of helping the private sector implement CERT. CERT was born out of disaster. During



Photo courtesy of The City of Temecula

the rescue efforts of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, hundreds of volunteers wanting to help were either injured or killed because they lacked training. CERT, which formed in California as a result of lessons learned in Mexico City, uses volunteers to assist with everything from earthquakes to wildfires.

Traditionally, however, CERT has been sponsored by city and state governments and operated exclusively in the public sector through volunteerism. Only in very recent years has the idea of developing CERT teams in the private sector become a reality. Many organizations erroneously assume that in times of disaster, local first responders will be there to help. The police, fire and EMS will arrive on the scene to care for the injured and restore peace and order. Right? Maybe not! If they aren't available, you may find that your first responders are members of your own organization.

Why CERT?

Let's assume for a minute that the unthinkable happens. It certainly would be better for them to be properly trained with the fundamental understanding of what actions they should take when disaster strikes.

Implementing a CERT training program will show employees that the company cares about their, and the community's, health and well-being. Creating a culture of preparedness and caring that transcends from the work place to the broader community is a win-win for everyone.

When considering CERT training, talk to other organizations with CERT teams and see how they have been adopted within their organizations. Check with your local fire department, because they will know where to find CERT members. Look through CERT emergency kits and what is in them.

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Top Management Commitment

CERT training requires complete buy-in from the top down, along with a willingness to invest (employee time, money for equipment and training, etc.) Don't assume that CERT will sell itself. Use all internal communications available to you to generate interest, such as orientation sessions, internal media, email updates and bulletin boards. Using your company logo and the CERT logo (accessible on the web), create flyers announcing the coming of the program. Obtain free preparedness literature from FEMA, your state health and human services departments, or the Red Cross. Leave the information in areas where people are sure to pick it up and at least browse through it. Try to do this at least 3 to 6 months before launching CERT.

CERT Program Tips

The next step involves building partnerships with outside agencies and businesses. One way to do this is to know your neighbors. For example, Joe Smith owns the pizza parlor next door, so you offer him a space at CERT training. Then if something happens to your building, he may reciprocate in kind with sheltering or food.

Build a relationship with the local fire chief. Have the fire department visit your facility and become familiar with your building(s). Knowing names and faces helps when you need trainers for modules like search and rescue, medical ops and fire safety. Who knows rescue better than the fire department? Another win-win for everyone!

Barter and trade services whenever possible. In these tight economic times no one is interested in spending a great deal of their revenue on another training program. Another benefit of bartering is that it will produce relationships with your greater "community". The most important facet of building these community relationships, however, is that in an emergency, people already know one another. It is much easier to work together when you have some knowledge of each other first before disaster brings you together.

The next phase of developing a CERT program is purchasing supplies. Use

materials you already have available before purchasing new. Each training module for CERT requires specific materials, such as manuals, dust masks, fire extinguishers, flashlights, duct tape, and wood. You may be able to have a local restaurant or car dealership sponsor the purchase of flashlights—publicity for them and equipment for you. Maybe in return, you offer to let someone from their business join your program. Fire extinguishers are another item that can be obtained relatively inexpensively. Fire extinguishers must be decommissioned after a number of years. Check with your building maintenance department, local schools or hospitals for decommissioned extinguishers. Offer to empty the extinguishers and return them afterwards so they can be recycled for scrap metal.

CERT Training

Training is the final piece. Lists of volunteer trainers are usually available from your state Emergency Management Agency or your local city Emergency Management Agency, the local Citizen Corp Counsel or the area fire department. If time away from work is not feasible, consider training sessions during lunch, evenings or Saturdays.

The 8 training modules that make up CERT are:

- **Disaster Preparedness** is an overview of the program and an understanding of how we, as individuals, can be prepared for various events like tornados, earthquakes, fires, medical emergencies, etc.
- The **Fire Safety** module gives the student a clear understanding of how to attack a fire, the types of fire extinguishers available, how to use a fire extinguisher properly and how to shut off utilities. This is always a class favorite.
- **Disaster Medical Ops I** trains CERT members about injuries often seen in a disaster, how to control bleeding, how to recognize shock, how to determine who can be helped and who cannot, what the "killers" are, and how to triage patients.
- **Disaster Medical Ops II** teaches members about hygiene and sanitation issues, the establishment of treatment areas, and conducting head

to toe assessments. Students get to practice splinting and bandaging wounds, and stabilizing patients. The medical ops modules are good practice for anyone.

- **Search and Rescue** teaches students how to safely extract victims who may be trapped, how to conduct a safe and thorough building sweep, and how to mark a building so other first responders will know the building has been checked and cleared.
- The **Disaster Psychology** module helps the CERT member understand the importance of empathy, how to recognize individuals who may need follow-up mental health assistance, and how to recognize when the situation has become too much for them.
- **CERT Organization** is a very important piece for members. This module teaches the fundamentals of incident command, command posts and operating in a unified structure. It teaches them their role in the bigger scheme of things. All students come away with a better appreciation for how everyone works together in a real emergency.
- The final module, **Terrorism**, gives the CERT members some insight into identifying the difference between manmade disasters and criminal activity, and what actions should be taken.
- The **Final Exercise** simulates a disaster that puts all of the skills and training together. It gives company leaders a chance to witness, first hand the success of the program, the relations that have been developed, and the real, tangible advantage that CERT brings to the organization.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In March of 2009, Saint Louis University became a model of success for building a CERT program in the private sector. In one year, over 90 students and staff were trained. Some of those trainees have gone on to become trainers themselves. If you or your organization would like to start a CERT program, SLU would be happy to assist you. For more information please contact Connie Tillman, MPA, Emergency Preparedness Coordinator for Saint Louis University, tillmanc@slu.edu.