

Notes from BCARES meeting, Tuesday, November 18, 2014

CERT: Citizen's Emergency Response Team

<http://www.fema.gov/community-emergency-response-teams>

Why CERT?

- \* Professional first responders are a limited resource. They can't be everywhere at once, especially when the needs of a large scale disaster are in more places than there are teams available.
- \* A disaster environment may prevent first responders from arriving in a timely manner. For example, during Hurricane Sandy, there were trees blocking a road, and the fire department was unable to remove it quickly enough to keep the house from burning completely to the ground. Multiply this by many different communities, and it becomes obvious that citizens need to be empowered to take care of themselves during disaster situations.
- \* Untrained volunteers often become victims themselves. According to some internet statistics (which should be taken skeptically), as many as half of all casualties from a disaster are from people trying to play the hero. Because of a lack of training and preparation, these volunteers end up causing more work for first responders rather than reducing the work. This is one of the main reasons why professional first responders are so hesitant to accept volunteers in emergency service, including amateur radio operators.

CERT goals, broadly:

- \* Expectation management. During a major disaster, people often expect the same kind of instant response they are used to during most times. Realistically, that just isn't possible during a disaster. People need to be able to take care of themselves for up to three days before help may be available. CERTs help reinforce that message to their neighborhoods.
- \* Training and preparation before disaster strikes. Because the primary aim of CERT is to reduce the number of casualties during a disaster, teams must be prepared for a wide variety of situations. The most important thing to learn is what our limits are. Volunteers have a habit of rushing in where angels, or devils, fear to tread. CERT takes a "train the trainer" model of first responders training team members, who in turn train community members. The content of this training can range from learning how to communicate needs when the cell networks are down to putting together ready kits for each household. Additionally, teams receive training in basic fire suppression and first aid.
- \* Ongoing relationship between volunteer teams and professional first responders. While many first responders view volunteers as a liability, we are also an asset. We can be hands and eyes in places they can't get to promptly. For those that remember the old TV show, Emergency, fire fighters were (and are) not licensed to provide medical care. But when in communication with a licensed physician, they could be trained to provide preliminary care beyond first aid at his or her direction. The same is true with CERT. With proper coordination and communications, a doctor can provide care to multiple inaccessible neighborhoods via trained team members from a single location.

CERT formal training:

- \* Must be sponsored by appointed or elected government officials.
- \* Must be conducted by professional first responders. Remember that the goal of CERT is to foster the relationship, not encourage an us vs. them mentality.
- \* Consists of 7 classroom sessions of 2 ½ hours each.

1. Disaster Preparedness
2. Disaster Fire Suppression
3. Disaster Medical Operations, part 1
4. Disaster Medical Operations, part 2
5. Light Search and Rescue Operations
6. Disaster Psychology and Team Organization
7. Course Review and Disaster Simulation

CERT limitations:

\* CERTs are legally considered Good Samaritans. While we are protected from legal liability in most instances, particularly from charges of negligence, CERTs in and of themselves don't have any inherent provision for compensation in the event a member is injured while acting as a volunteer. Depending on the relationship a particular organization has with a served agency, however, local teams may be provided for.

\* CERTs have no legal authority. While teams may assist with parking duties at special events, they may not direct traffic on public roadways. They cannot order people into or out of any area. When a professional first responder arrives on scene, the volunteer must immediately without question submit to their instructions, EVEN IF THEY ARE WRONG. (This led to a bit of discussion on just how often those with authority act without listening to all the information. A proper working relationship between CERTs and professionals before a disaster can help alleviate some of this tension.)

\* CERTs must be aware of the limits of their training, and avoid dangerous situations at all times. This not only means that volunteers must resist the impulse to rush into a burning building to save a life; but we must also be aware of the limits of our own bodies. It's very common to think we have the stamina of someone 20 years younger, and then put ourselves in the position of needing help ourselves. Part of our training must include learning our own physical limits, and not being afraid to tell the acting coordinator what those limits are, even if it means a post goes unmanned for a time.

PA CERTs:

\* Greater Philadelphia Search & Rescue (actually in Montgomery County) <http://www.gpsar.org>.

\* PA Medical Reserve Corps

\* Delaware County CERT

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From here, we entered into a discussion on how we would respond as communicators in the event of civil unrest, such as that taking place recently in Ferguson, MO. Such things are not impossible even in our area as we recalled the Bristol Riots in the 70s, and similar large protests in State College. Though not publicized, some township and county agencies are including the idea in their exercises and preparations. As amateur radio operators, we need to be similarly prepared.

Two suggestions came up from our discussion.

First, if all residents are commanded to remain indoors, we need to have a way to staying in touch with each other. All amateur operators should have, in addition to their ham equipment, a full 14-channel FRS radio, and a full 40-channel CB radio, tested and known to be in working order. In conjunction with this, we should be encouraging our neighbors to have and use their own FRS radios, and provide them to those who cannot afford them. A designated channel should be set aside for

emergency requests, which the local ham operator can relay to an EOC or Incident Command Post. To broaden the number of relay stations available, we also need to reach out to lightly active hams to at least keep them up to date on what modes and frequencies will be in use during an emergency. While they are not trained ARES members, they could be a valuable asset (see how CERT connects in many different scales) that could be directed were a member can't be sent.

Second, we need to work with our local police and fire safety officials to designate shelters where neighbors can share their own food, water, and communications supplies; and where first responders can agree to station when they can't get into affected areas. This is different from the Red Cross shelter list, because it is highly unlikely that the Red Cross will be able to get supplies or personnel into an affected area until well after the unrest has quieted.

Related to both these points, Karl, K3KH, reminded us of Council Rock South's amateur radio station to be used for an upcoming ARISS contact. While most schools don't have their own amateur radio stations, most are built securely enough to withstand rioting and can house a large number of citizens for an extended period. We have also practiced setting up stations at several schools, which typically provide an RF hostile environment. Finding sympathetic teachers and administrators can help us demonstrate the value of amateur radio to students, science, and the community as a whole.