***Lessons Learned by CERT Volunteers During Sandy Activation***

Next month marks the two-year anniversary of Hurricane Sandy. Three CERT programs – Arlington County, VA; Cohasset, MA; and Middle Township, NJ – recently shared their experiences before, during, and after the historic storm made landfall. Each program encountered a variety of challenges during their activation, but they all found ways to overcome these obstacles and provide much-needed support to their communities. Below are the lessons learned and promising practices that were compiled from each interview.

**Question: Can you briefly describe your CERT's activation during Superstorm Sandy?**

**Arlington County CERT** – Over 150 of the 275 active-duty volunteers of Arlington County CERT were deployed in response to Superstorm Sandy. CERT was on-call before the storm hit Virginia, and volunteers were officially deployed on October 30 to conduct damage assessment and to mark off hazards in the county. Nearly 300 issues were reported in the first hours of damage assessment, including: downed utility lines, downed trees, inoperable street lights, damaged vehicles, impassable roads and sidewalks, and inoperable generators at county facilities. CERT reported their findings to the Emergency Operations Center.

**Cohasset CERT** – Sixteen volunteers of the Cohasset CERT team worked a 12-hour shift on October 29. Volunteers were assigned to various municipal departments to provide supplemental support to staff, including: Health, Council on Elder Affairs, Police, Public Works, and the Emergency Operations Center. The last CERT volunteer was released at 11 p.m. on October 29. In total, Cohasset CERT volunteers served for 135 hours during their activation.

> "For a team only 'certified' seven days prior, we were a huge force multiplier. Our combined Police and Fire Departments totaled 34 first responders, so adding 17 CERT volunteers was a major contribution." – **Glenn Pratt, Cohasset CERT**

**Middle Township CERT** – Members of the local fire, police, EMS, and County Sheriff departments supported the 15 Middle Township CERT volunteers that were deployed to assist and staff shifts in a much-needed shelter at the Middle Township Elementary School. Along with members of the Cape May Court House, CERT assisted in setting up cots and beds for displaced families, children, and older Americans; as well as providing psychological first aid for the nearly 100 people that stayed at the shelter during the storm. CERT volunteers rotated shifts at the shelter from set up the morning of Sunday, October 28, until the last person left the shelter at 4 p.m. on Tuesday, October 30.

**Question: What were your biggest CERT program challenges or struggles before, during, and after your Superstorm Sandy activation? How did your CERT overcome these challenges?**

**Middle Township CERT** – Before the storm, the biggest challenge was

**Characteristics of Successful CERT Programs:**

- Strong Leadership
- Effective Communication
- Flexible and Committed Volunteers
- Buy-in from Local Officials

**Communication is key during activation!** Be sure to devise a communication plan before an emergency strikes.

trying to get new team volunteers organized and trained quickly. During the storm, staying organized was one of the most difficult tasks. We were keeping track of CERT volunteers while managing numerous activities, and organization was difficult. After the storm, one of our largest struggles was ensuring deployed volunteers had the support they needed. The CERT program overcame these challenges by maintaining a strong commitment to helping their local government and town residents in a time of need. A large part of their success can be attributed to the commitment of the program to planning and preparing for such scenarios prior to hurricane season.

**Question: What are three things your CERT program learned from being activated during Superstorm Sandy?**

**Arlington County CERT**:

1. Practice makes perfect; we fine-tune the process each time.
2. Assume nothing; self-sufficiency increases your value to the community.
3. It's important to continuously grow the strength of your leadership.

**Cohasset CERT**:

1. The need is real; the number of missions and tasks that have to be accomplished is formidable and unpredictable.
2. CERT is an important core in our town-wide response efforts.
3. We all need ongoing training and drills to broaden our experience.

**Middle Township CERT**:

1. How to work together and cooperate.
2. The community really appreciates what we can do for them.
3. How organized we can be and that our pre-planning worked.

**Question: What advice would you give to other CERT programs that may be activated in an emergency like Superstorm Sandy?**

**Arlington County CERT**:

- Do as much advance work as you can prior to a deployment; pre-print specific maps and forms, assemble supplies, assign grids to be surveyed, and outline likely scenarios.
- Emphasize personal safety.
- Make sure you understand exactly what is expected of the volunteers and be very clear and thorough in directions/instructions to CERT volunteers. This helps ensure you meet the expectations of those you serve and reduce the likelihood of problems and injuries.

"We don't typically deploy before daylight in order to minimize the possibility of people stepping on things they can't see in the dark (like downed power lines). We continuously remind folks to look up and look down when assessing damage (wires and branches can be dangling in trees and on poles) and we emphasize the buddy system." – **Cynthia Kellams, Arlington County CERT**

**Cohasset CERT**

- Have the area of responsibility clearly defined by the Emergency Management Incident Commander, and work within the ICS structure.
- Take "before" photographs of as many areas as possible; this will help FEMA with damage assessments when they visit to survey the damage after the storm.
- Consider a contract with a generator company to ensure there is enough power for warming centers and other basic functions should the electricity go out for several days.
- Include National Grid in your CERT special training.
- Upgrade any two-way analog radios to two-way digital radios, and test the range before use.

**To learn more about each of these CERT programs, please visit their profile pages:**

- Arlington County CERT
- Cohasset CERT
- Middle Township CERT

Interviews were conducted with the following: Cynthia Kellams, Volunteer Program Coordinator, Arlington County CERT; Glenn Pratt, Director of Emergency Management, Cohasset CERT; and Herb Siefken, Program Manager, Middle Township CERT.