



Establishing a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT)

in Cordova, Alaska

June 7, 2005

Mission Statement

To better prepare the community of Cordova against all kinds disasters and emergencies by providing leadership, training, service opportunities, and equipment for volunteers engaged in serving our community during times of crises.

Background

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is the federal agency responsible for disaster preparedness and assistance in the United States. FEMA became part of the new U.S. Department of Homeland Security after its formation following the 9/11 attacks (see Figure 1). FEMA established the national Citizen Corps initiative, which is dedicated to strengthening communities against natural and man-made disasters. Because many of our communities are isolated, the Citizen Corps initiative presents unique opportunities for Alaska. Therefore, Citizen Corps programs may have greater and more frequent application in Alaska than in other states.

Citizen Corps Councils are local organizations that help drive citizen participation by coordinating Citizen Corps programs, obtaining funding, developing community action plans, assessing possible threats and identifying local resources. The State Emergency Response Commission formed a Citizen Corps Council to assist Alaskans in forming their own CCC's in their communities. Currently there are eleven Citizen Corps Councils in Alaska. The State of Alaska has received funding from FEMA to establish additional CCC's in communities.

The City of Cordova has recently established a Citizen Corps Council in our community. The Cordova CCC is working to expand opportunities for volunteer service that will support emergency preparation, prevention, and response. The CCC is made up of members of the Cordova Volunteer Fire Department's Disaster Management Team and other citizens (Figure 1). In the first year of operation, the primary responsibility of the Cordova CCC is to implement a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), which is one program offered by the Citizen Corps initiative. The CERT will be composed of volunteers from the community who will be trained and equipped to assist first responders during disasters, and to help families and businesses with emergency preparedness. This paper lays out our strategy for implementation of the program during the next year.

Current Situation in the Community

Cordova is an isolated community located on the eastern coast of Prince William Sound and is accessible only by boat or airplane. Our population fluctuates seasonally from 2,400 year-round residents to approximately 5,000 people during the fishing season. There are several ethnic groups in town, including Filipino, Hispanic, Russian and Native Alaskan. Language barriers could result during emergencies.

Cordova is situated in an area subject to potential natural disasters including tsunamis, earthquakes, avalanches, storm tides, and coastal flooding. The weather is extreme with maritime conditions resulting in a combination of flooding rain and severe winter conditions. There is a history of man-made disasters such as the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill and catastrophic structure fires. Terrorist attacks on tourist ships, ferries, airlines, or infrastructure could result in mass casualties, which would quickly overwhelm our first responders. Additionally, there is the potential for globe-trotting infectious diseases to enter our community by tour ships, daily flights from the lower 48, and seasonal influx of workers from around the world. The spread of disease can be locally mitigated if the community is prepared in advance.

Because of Cordova's isolation there is no timely emergency response from outside the community. Our emergency response system is operated by, or includes, the City of Cordova, Volunteer Fire Department (CVFD), Police, State Troopers, and Ski Patrol. During the last 2 years the Disaster Management Team has been trained to assist city employees with the Incident Command System.

We know from previous emergencies that many Cordova citizens are willing and able to assist first responders in the field. In every major disaster volunteers participated in initial search and rescue, fire suppression, and first aid. Since such volunteering inevitably occurs, it makes good sense to maximize the results of these efforts through formal training. The Citizen Corps Council seeks to develop and improve citizen response capabilities by organizing and training volunteers to become CERT members. The Citizen Corps Council has applied for and received a grant from the State of Alaska (Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management) to obtain equipment and training for the CERT program. Five members of the Cordova Volunteer Fire Department have become certified trainers for the CERT volunteers.

Program Goals and Expectations

Under the oversight of the Citizen Corps Council, CERT teams will be trained to assist first responders. Acting as individuals first, then later as a team, trained volunteers can fan out within their particular areas, extinguishing small fires, turning off utilities to damaged areas, performing light search and rescue, and rendering first aid. CERT members can undergo additional training in damage assessment, communications, flood control, hospital security, shelter management, language translation, traffic control, patient comfort, day care and animal shelter.

Cordova businesses and utility companies provide critical services to our community. In the event of a disaster the CERT will assist as necessary with damage mitigation and security to businesses and utility companies to protect the services they provide.

In addition to first response in a crises, another primary function of the CERT will be to implement a community outreach program to prepare households and businesses against disasters. The CERT will distribute information to homes and businesses on all aspects of emergency preparedness. These projects will include: ensuring that every household has working smoke alarms and emergency kits; having each business practice their evacuation plans; and identification of community groups living in high risk areas and citizens with disabilities. The CERT can also be called upon to assist with parades and other planned community events.

Because of the variety of tasks performed by the CERT, the Citizen Corps Council is seeking volunteers from a wide segment of the community.

The Citizen Corps Council has established the following list of objectives for the Citizen Corps program. These objectives are for the year from April 2005 to April 2006.

- To plan a community Citizen Corps fair in Fall 2005 with informational booths
- To aid first responders using citizen volunteers
- To develop and implement outreach programs addressing household and business preparedness
- To evaluate and coordinate emergency operating plans among all agencies and businesses involved with first response
- To appoint one dedicated volunteer as CERT Director, who will take over operations of the CERT from the Citizen Corps Council
- To establish a 40 member CERT team
- To equip members with CERT kits (hard hat, vest, gloves, etc.) and to establish a cache of supplies, tools and materials to support and facilitate CERT operations
- To work toward locating funding sources for becoming self-sustaining (4 year objective)

CERT Enrollment

The Cordova CERT program has 3 levels of participation. Each participant will select a level (or tier) based on the time and commitment that they are willing to bring to the program. The 3 tiers are as follows, listed in increasing level of commitment:

Tier One – Awareness Level. This level will provide the member with approximately 18 hours of basic training, resulting in an increased awareness of emergency and disaster response that may enable them to better help themselves and their families during an emergency or disaster.

Tier Two – Neighborhood Response Level. This level will provide the member with 20 hours of basic training, including a simulated emergency training exercise, and increased awareness and disaster response that may enable them to help themselves, their families and, in limited circumstances, their immediate neighborhood during an emergency or disaster.

Tier Three – Community Response Level. This level will provide the member with the same level of training as Tier Two. However, this level requires a higher level of commitment as it offers the participant the opportunity to assist the City of Cordova emergency response personnel during a community-wide emergency or disaster. Tier Three participants will be placed on the Cordova CERT phone list for activation in the event of a community-wide disaster.

CERT members will participate in our community outreach program, which will be the distribution of emergency preparedness information to households and businesses in Cordova. We also expect our CERT members to prepare their own households against disaster, and to keep their CERT kits and necessary clothing readily available.

Training Strategy

Certified trainers will use established programs to train CERT volunteers in various aspects of emergency response. CERT members must go through the initial course of 20 hours to qualify for the team. This initial course will cover the following topics:

- Disaster preparedness
- Fire suppression
- Medical operations
- Light search and rescue operations
- Disaster psychology and team organization
- Terrorism and BNICE agents: biological, nuclear, incendiary, chemical, explosive
- The course will finish with a disaster simulation exercise

Additional training in specialized response will be available after the program is in operation. Training will be composed of both lecture in the Fire Hall, and hands-on training in the field. While the training is serious and important to the safety of CERT members, we expect it to be interesting and fun for those of us who are not first responders.

Team Organization

Depending on the number of volunteers, the CERT will be organized into various smaller units trained to respond to specific areas and tasks. CERT crews may be organized based on individual skills or by location. For example, there can be a CERT crew dedicated to damage assessment, a high school CERT crew composed of students and teachers, and a crew to assist with fire suppression. Team organization will be the responsibility of the CERT director, who has yet to be appointed.

How Will CERT Operate with Existing First Responders?

CERT volunteers will be trained to self-activate following a major event. When the ground stops shaking or the tsunami siren blows, CERT crews will report to the Fire Hall with gear, appropriate clothing, bicycles, ATV's and other equipment as planned in advance.

Each CERT crew will have a crew leader responsible for working at assigned tasks and the safety of crew members. CERT crews will receive their marching orders from the CERT Director, who in turn will operate under the direction of the Operations Chief in the City's Incident Command System (ICS) (Figure 1). Operation of the CERT within the ICS will assure that CERT crews will provide maximum benefit and assistance to first responders. The CERT Director and crews will communicate using cellular telephones if the system is in operation. If cell phone systems are out, communications will be by assigned runners, who may need to travel by bicycle or ATV if roads are damaged. If funding allows, we will ultimately have hand-held radios assigned to the CERT Director and crews.

In Summary

Community Emergency Response Team training is a FEMA program that educates citizens about the hazards they face in their community and trains them in life-saving skills. If needed

following a disaster, these citizen-responders use their training as part of a team to help others when professional responders are overwhelmed or not immediately available. CERT members provide immediate assistance to victims in their area, organize spontaneous volunteers who have not had the training, and collect disaster intelligence that will assist professional responders with prioritization and allocation of resources when they arrive.

Figure 1. Federal, State, and Local Citizen Corps Organization

