Managing growth in community emergency response team programs

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ABSTRACT

Since September 11, 2001, Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) programs have expanded to meet the growing demand for training in disaster preparedness. While extra help during a disaster is needed due to a lack of resources, the use of volunteer responders presents a unique challenge to emergency service managers.

Even when trained, volunteers are often not prepared for the physical, mental, and psychological strain of a crisis. As a result, their needs differ from those of professional emergency workers. Consequently, organizing and delegating work to volunteers adds a level of complexity to the role of emergency managers.

The CERT program in Chandler, Arizona—one of the largest in the state—trained over 400 people in the last year and has encountered many of the problems associated with a rapidly growing volunteer program. During this period of growth, trainers identified several problem areas facing disaster managers including communication issues, effective incident command, a lack of focus that can lead to freelancing at scenes, and the psychological needs of responders. Currently, these issues are being addressed through added training in critical areas, mandatory critical incident stress debriefing, and further studies to better the CERT program.

Currently, the CERT is examining several ideas to help alleviate these problems through continuing education. Professional responders need to work alongside CERT members and become attuned to the signs of physical and emotional exhaustion in volunteers. In addition, they need to be trained in assertiveness and the skill of defusing potentially volatile situations.

Team members need to receive training each year to refresh their skills and be reminded of the mission: to do the greatest good for the greatest number.

INTRODUCTION

Since the horrific events of September 11, 2001, millions of Americans have felt compelled to volunteer in their communities or seek training to prepare themselves for future crises. In fact, the response has been so large that many government agencies and organizations have had trouble finding enough tasks for volunteers or enough classes to meet the demand. This holds true for Chandler, Arizona.

The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program was started in 1985 in Los Angeles specifically to prepare volunteers in the event of a large, catastrophic earthquake. However, the program soon evolved into a means of preparing citizens for any type of disaster where extra personnel resources may be needed. Today, the Los Angeles CERT program has nearly 47,000 trained volunteer responders.

CHANDLER, ARIZONA CERT

The Chandler, Arizona, CERT program was the first viable program in the state and has trained over 400 volunteers in its first two years. The demand for classes remains high, and citizens are wait-listed for class openings. The city of Chandler has been eager to prepare citizens as part of its focus on customer service and public education. Both its police and fire departments are internationally accredited.

Initially, the Chandler CERT program began small and has continued to grow. In the first year, members of CERT and the fire department adminis-
administration realized that, in order to grow further, a governing board needed to be formed. As a result, the Chandler CERT Council was established to help administer the program, promote events, and aid in training and continuing education (CE). Council members meet monthly to discuss the program achievements, what needs to be done, and what can be done better. All of this is done in conjunction with the fire department administration.

In the last year, the Council has expanded the program’s purpose to aid the fire department with outreach programs, such as car seat safety and drowning prevention. Furthermore, with the rapid expansion of the program, the Council elected to divide volunteers into three different groups based upon feedback from participants. A large number of people completing the training had noted that they would simply like to be a part of the CERT program for their own knowledge, rather than responding to large events. Based on this feedback, the CERT developed the Three Tier System.

The Three Tier System was designed to allow people to choose the level at which they would like to be involved and the level of training they would undertake. Historically, each trainee would receive six nights of training and participate as part of a response team to a simulated disaster on night seven. The Tier System changes how the CERT now operates.

Tier One is for volunteers who choose to take the classes for their own edification. This is known as the Personal Awareness Tier. These participants are trained to help their family survive in the event of a disaster where services may be unavailable for up to three days. People who select this tier receive six nights of training, like everyone else in the program. However, when responders are needed, these trainees manage their families. These volunteers do not receive a vest or helmet upon program completion.

Tier Two, also known as Neighborhood Responders, are people who will respond to help their neighbors but are not called for larger events that may occur in other parts of the city. These volunteers receive the six nights of training, participate in a simulated disaster on night seven, and receive a helmet and vest upon completion. Furthermore, these volunteers undergo a background investigation as a city volunteer, since they may be needed to help others outside their family. Additionally, Neighborhood Responders must complete one CE class each year and complete an annual disaster drill held on night seven of training or annually by the Chandler Fire Department. The volunteers are issued new identification cards each year to ensure that each volunteer is current in their education requirements.

Tier Three is the Community Responder level. These volunteers undergo the same training and scrutiny as the Neighborhood Responder, in the beginning. However, the CE class requirements are more involved. The annual disaster drill requirement is the same, but the Community Responders must complete three CE classes annually. Additionally, any person wishing to be on the CERT Council must be a Community Responder in good standing. Like the Neighborhood Responders, identification cards are issued each year.

As previously mentioned, those volunteers responding to help others when activated by the fire department undergo a background check. This is a means by which to protect the city and its citizens.
Furthermore, in an effort to protect the volunteers, they are covered by workman’s compensation insurance when they are activated by the fire department. However, it must be stressed that the volunteers are only covered when activated by the fire department. This helps to ensure that volunteers are accounted for during activation and to prevent false claims.

The Chandler CERT program is a perfect example of how a fast-growing program can be managed effectively to accommodate everyone wishing to volunteer, protect the city’s interests through background checks and insurance provisions, and provide the city’s fire department with extra manpower when circumstances may necessitate. However, the long-term success of the program depends on quality training and continuing education.

CHANDLER’S TRAINING AND CE PROGRAM
Like most CERT programs, the training is fairly standardized. However, an understanding of the concepts is critical to making the initial training and the subsequent application of the program into a working machine. Each participant must understand their role, as well as the roles of the other people involved in a response. The CERT examined the role of the professional responder and the volunteer responder in both initial training and CE training. From this, an analysis of the CE program has been undertaken and several recommendations made in order to better both the initial and CE training programs. These recommendations will strengthen the team spirit and the cooperation between both professional and volunteer responders.

PROFESSIONAL RESPONDERS
This category includes the firefighters and Emergency Medical System (EMS) workers who deal with emergencies every day. They are called professional responders because they have the training and regular hands-on experience in emergencies.

Part of the initial CERT program involves having professional responders complete a train-the-trainer course. This course provides them with the ability to provide basic emergency response skills to people who have little or no experience in the field. The course is designed to guide them through delivering the topics of CERT training without becoming too technical or using jargon that will frustrate the trainees.

Professional responders are then assigned to teach a class or specific topics from the program. This enables trainees to meet several different members of the fire department. Furthermore, teaching the classes gives the professionals a chance to recognize the skills of the trainees and see what they can expect each volunteer to be able to do when activated. The professionals also assist with the night-seven disaster simulations and assess how the volunteers perform and identify potential problems.

The professionals are also integral to the CE training program. It is an excellent idea to hold drills that include both professional and volunteer responders. The volunteers are trained to provide support for an area without services for up to three days. However, in some cases, the volunteers will be working in conjunction with the professional responders. In these scenarios, the fire department maintains control of the situation and the command structure. However, this command structure may seem foreign to volunteers, and the command of volunteers may be new to the professional responders.

By holding drills in concert, the professional responders, especially officers, receive experience in
Managing volunteer responders. This enables the professionals to view the volunteers in action, recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and know their physical and mental limitations. Perhaps the greatest concern is recognizing mental and physical fatigue in the volunteers. Professionals are used to working with other professionals and are keen to their limits (Figure 1). However, volunteers may fatigue faster or may need rehabilitation or counseling services more frequently or sooner than professional responders. These drills help professionals to recognize the signs in volunteers and have those vital services ready when needed.

**VOLUNTEER RESPONDERS**

Volunteer responders are the core of the CERT program. However, volunteers must be carefully managed in order to protect the community and to maintain both a customer service focus and a unified command structure. Without focus and structure, volunteers can quickly become a part of the problem and hinder execution of the solution to aid the community. The CERT program provides a means to train volunteers in aiding the community and a uniform method for delivering these services.

Volunteer responders are often driven to help the community; however, they rarely have experience in this field. The training can be intimidating and discourage many potential volunteers from offering their time. As a result, the education and CE programs must be focused on providing the trainees with a chance to repeat basic skills so that these skills become second nature when a disaster occurs. Volunteers need to feel confident when they enter the field. Annual drills and CE classes provide volunteers with the confidence they need to perform effectively (Figure 2). Confidence and a thorough knowledge and practice of the command structure enable volunteers to complete their jobs and report back to the command area for effective deployment of resources. The repetition of tasks helps to prevent a practice known as “freelancing.” Freelancers are those people who become absorbed in helping every person they encounter without reporting to central command. Often, people who have received minor injuries are helped before patients who are critically injured. Confidence in skills and an ability to focus are critical to ensuring that a disaster response runs smoothly.

Another component of effective training is that of assertiveness. Volunteers often lose focus when they have little or no experience. Volunteers must be trained to be assertive, but professional, when rendering care to injured people. Quite often, family or friends of an injured person will attempt to distract rescuers to help someone who is suffering from a minor injury. However, the distraction can completely disrupt a volunteer and help to create chaos.

Incident command is one of the most difficult jobs to perform. Communication, key to effective management in any situation, is the first thing that breaks down. The incident commander looks for information to determine how to deploy resources, but reports either are not delivered or they do not come quickly enough. In some cases, resources may be deployed only to find that another sector needs immediate help, but the information was delayed too long. The Chandler CERT has implemented a CE class to train volunteers in effective incident command leadership, mainly with small teams. However, these skills can easily be used by an incident commander for any scenario.

The final key component is critical incident stress debriefing (CISD). When volunteers return home to
their families, they often have an abnormal level of adrenaline pumping through their bodies and may need counseling to effectively process the ordeal under which they have been operating. Professional and volunteer responders must both be trained in CISD methods in order to provide one another with the chance to express their feelings and process what they have experienced. Without this component of training, many volunteers would return to their families in a poor mental state, which could be protracted if not addressed. Furthermore, volunteers must maintain their well-being. When they need a break, they need to take one. If they need a counselor, they must ask for one. In order to help others, volunteers must look out for themselves.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Several recommendations have been made regarding the initial and CE training program for the Chandler CERT program. They are:

- CE must include classes on assertiveness and conflict resolution to help the volunteers gain confidence. This will lessen the time needed to identify critical patients, avoid the problems of freelancing, and help the volunteer control the scene.

- Professional responders need to be included in all aspects of initial and annual CE training in order to give them a better understanding of the abilities of the volunteers, as well as give them an opportunity to become familiar with commanding volunteers.

- CISD is an integral part of disaster response, and volunteers need to be trained in this area.

- The well-being of volunteers is extremely important. Volunteers need to realize their limits and know when to take a break or ask for help, either in rehabilitation or in counseling.

- Professional and volunteer responders need to be able to work side-by-side and recognize their roles, as well as the command structure for any incident. Collaboration will make the response work smoothly.

- Responders must adhere to the CERT motto: to do the greatest good for the greatest number.

**CONCLUSION**

CERT programs are here to stay. The large demand for this training has been welcome in all 50 states, especially since municipal government budgets continue to decline in funds for additional personnel. While the addition of volunteers to help is welcome, effective management of any CERT program is a challenge. A tiered system helps to provide effective management, especially since most volunteers will undergo a background check. Additionally, the tiered system enables volunteers to attend training based on their own interests and learning abilities.

Both classes of responders, professional and volunteer, must work alongside one another as often as possible. This cooperation will lead to better incident command and communication, since both are familiar with one another (Figure 3).

Any CERT program must have a CE program to continue to educate the volunteers and to brush up on skills needed in case of a disaster. Without an effective CE program, volunteers lose certain skills and are less likely to help when a disaster occurs. The CE program must be easily adapted to incorporate new types of training, and receptive to feedback from participants concerning how the program can be improved or expanded.

The CERT program is a useful addition to the many tools of the fire department. However, like any other tool, it must be maintained and used to ensure its efficacy.

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