

CERT

by Wendy Tayer, Ph.D.

CERT stands for Community Emergency Response Team and is a national FEMA program designed to train ordinary citizens to help first responders in their own communities. I became aware of the program when I attended an “Are You Ready” presentation at my local library presented by local CERT members who were fellow school moms. I felt inspired. It was 2014 and I had more time on my hands because my youngest child had recently passed his road test. With the lion’s share of day-to-day parenting behind me, I was looking to expand my horizons to community-minded activities beyond the PTA and education foundation volunteer positions.

I had lived through several fires and the countywide blackout in San Diego, the London Tube and bus bombings of 2005, and lost a high school friend in the Twin Towers on 9/11. I decided that it was time for me to extend my skills as a clinical psychologist and a caring human being to everyday life outside of my psychotherapy office. International, national and local events in the past 15 years had heightened my awareness of the critical importance of learning survival skills.

I called the phone number that was listed in the small article in my local newspaper and registered for the next CERT academy at my local fire station. I found myself among a variety of North County citizens much like one might find during jury selection - various ages, backgrounds, ethnicities and reasons for seeking the training. The one quality that we shared was the desire to help others and to learn adaptive coping skills in order to do so. My academy training was concise and feasible for working professionals, comprising two weekday evenings and three Saturdays. The training modules include:

Disaster Preparation

Medical/Basic First Aid Training

CERT organization

Disaster Psychology, Terrorism

Fire Safety

Cribbing (technique for using materials on hand to lift heavy debris in order to free people and animals who are trapped), and

Light Search and Rescue.

The course ended with a final drill/practice session. CERT instructors and local firemen lead the training sessions and drills at local firehouses. In the past year, FEMA added a mandatory online course which consists of a 6 hours of comprehensive CERT material on the FEMA website. Course content includes similar material in addition to an overview of CERT, detection and management of hazardous materials, incident

command/ communication protocols during a disaster, and the ubiquitous multiple choice test at the end. CERT typically holds two academies per year over San Diego County and offers other informational sessions on disaster related topics throughout the year such as swift water rescue, use of search and rescue dogs, earthquake preparedness, and operation of ham radios for use when cell phone and/or landlines are down. CERT San Diego organizes a countywide drill every year which varies in location and type of disaster that is simulated. Throughout the calendar year, regular rehearsal of CERT skills is emphasized. All graduates of the program become certified, receive an official CERT ID card and a GO BAG which is stocked with supplies for use in the event of a disaster. Typical contents include first aid supplies, flashlight, work gloves, hard hat, official CERT vest, colored tape for identifying victims of a disaster by type of injury, markers for keeping track of victim transport as well as search and rescue missions. Certification is valid for two years and recertification is accomplished by retaking the online course and attending the last day of a local academy in which the skills are put into practice and rehearsed in a simulated exercise. Alternatively, members may participate in the countywide drill for credit. Both experiences are worthwhile, and offer valuable opportunities to keep current with one's skill set.

CERT also plans and implements drills during the California Shakeout in October and for Biohazard disasters such as a countywide anthrax attack. I find these drills instructive and reassuring; I now know that the county is prepared with a stockpile of antibiotic treatment doses to counteract anthrax or another biohazard for the entire population of our county. There are plans in place for administering the doses to the populace in a very organized, efficient fashion. CERT was initiated in San Diego following the 2003 Cedar Fire when it became clear that first responders cannot be everywhere when wide-ranging disasters strike. Furthermore, infrastructure and communications systems can be damaged, which delays the actions of first responders. The rationale for CERT is that the people who are in the immediate vicinity of the event can be trained to respond to the event and can save lives, extinguish fires, find missing persons, and administer emotional first aid while waiting for firemen and emergency medical personnel to arrive. CERT provides opportunities for citizens to play a role in helping to diminish the impact of the disaster to affected persons in the immediate aftermath of such events.

CERT encourages each member to play a role in which he or she is comfortable. There are many CERT roles, including incident commander, scribe (note taker), first aid/triage worker, search and rescue team, and record keeper outside of a building to count bodies removed, among others. Members are given the choice to perform a duty that they feel competent to do at a drill or actual disaster site. It is very important to note that CERT members **MUST** be activated by local first responders or CERT personnel in order to perform CERT functions during a disaster. Activation usually happens via a cell phone call or text. I have never been activated during an emergency. But I have had multiple opportunities to rehearse my skills. As a psychologist, I have taken the opportunity to become an expert in Emotional First Aid and have taught the mini course to local CERT

members. I have also passed on some of my training to my graduate students as I believe that it is important for them to have the knowledge that these programs exist. That way they know how to get involved should they be interested. I strongly feel that as mental health professionals, we be armed with survival skills to apply in our personal and professional lives.

The Emotional First Aid mini course consists of teaching CERT members (not just mental health professionals) the fundamentals of disaster psychology – describing a typical disaster scene, the array of symptoms that people can experience in response to trauma/disaster, how to talk to disaster survivors, basic empathy training, how to approach and aid individuals with special needs (seniors, mentally ill, blind, dementia, autism, etc.) in addition to practical coping approaches, education about resiliency and self-care, utilization of the CERT team for relief and breaks, debriefing after a disaster or drill and useful apps for survivors and CERT members to utilize that may help with coping, finding loved ones, and locating a temporary shelter. It is a lot of information, but generally well-received by my CERT audience.

CERT members are not limited to disaster related duties and services. They are also encouraged to assist with community safety projects and help friends, coworkers and neighbors make preparations for emergencies (The “Are You Ready?” presentation that initially inspired me was one such community safety project). Examples of readiness for individuals are education about mitigating disaster in the home by removing potentially hazardous or flammable materials, assessing one’s property and workplace for unsecured objects in the event of an earthquake or ensuring that one’s house has a fire resistant roof and property is clear of dry brush and vegetation, organizing and updating a family Go-Bag, and volunteering at local public events to educate the public about CERT.

CERT is one of many ways to get involved with disaster recovery, and the array of disaster related organizations can be confusing to navigate. CERT is unique and distinct from the Red Cross, the most widely recognized disaster response agency in the world, in that the former is a federally financed FEMA program in which citizens help out when disasters occur in their own neighborhoods. The Red Cross is an international humanitarian organization that provides emergency assistance, disaster relief and education in countries around the world. The American Red Cross (ARC), a subgroup of the international agency, deploys volunteers locally and domestically at disaster sites all over the United States. The ARC focuses on meeting basic human needs such as shelter, food, and mental health services (psychological first aid), but does not provide medical or search and rescue services. In contrast, CERT trains its members in basic first aid and search and rescue techniques as well as psychological first aid but does not provide shelter services, per se. However, CERT members may undergo specialized training to become certified shelter workers. There are opportunities for the two agencies to collaborate and efforts are underway to foster more teamwork between CERT and ARC in San Diego County.

CERT training and membership has been an extremely rewarding and enlightening venture for me over the past three years. I have learned a great deal, and feel confident that I know how to act in the event of an emergency (the latter is a testament of the adeptness of the CERT program in training its members to perform their skills in the event of an emergency). It emphasizes teamwork and self-care above all else. A major drawback of the program is that CERT does not do much to actively recruit new members despite being always in need of new members as existing members age out or retire from the program. It relies on word-of-mouth communications, booths at local street fairs, and local newspaper listings to advertise their academies. These efforts pale in comparison to other agencies that use the internet and social media to their advantage. One or two CERT groups have their own apps for operational purposes, but a universal app developed for use all over the country would be welcome. There are opportunities to express concerns such as these at local meetings as CERT prioritizes a team approach and clear communication.

In conclusion, I urge you to consider CERT training if you are interested in extending your helping hands to the outside world beyond your office. The world events of the past few years suggest that it is critical for us to be trained in disaster preparedness, both in our personal and professional lives. Feel free to contact me with any questions at wtayer@ucsd.edu.

For more home preparedness information, you can access **ARE YOU READY?** at www.ready.gov/are-you-ready-guide or www.ready.gov.

For more information about CERT San Diego, go to www.sandiegocounty.gov/oes/community/oes_jl_CERT.html