

Emergency Response Planning for CERTs

Each CERT should develop a written response plan. A written plan enables the team to become a self sustaining entity even after the team's founders have moved away from the neighborhood. A written plan also allows the team to respond effectively if the team's leaders are unable to respond. Any team member should be able to open the plan and implement it. The format suggestion provided in the link above is extensive and can be simplified by using the CERT basic training manual for the topics of SAR, Med Ops, Fire Suppression and Communications & Documentation.

The first step in organizing any team is to hold a team meeting where all the team members can meet each other and establish the leadership positions for the team. The first step in developing the response plan is to hold a team drill. The purpose of the drill is to gather information which will be used to identify potential hazards and neighbors which may require extra help in the aftermath of a disaster. Gather your team and assign them in groups of two. Divide your team's service area equally between the units. Send them out with a questionnaire, a clip board and their safety equipment. Ask them to move through their assigned area, door-to-door, and interview the occupants of each home or business. You may devise your own questionnaire, but, remember to keep it as short and general as possible. Most people will tolerate five or ten minutes of interruption in their routines and will gladly answer questions until they feel the questions are too specific. Do not ask personal questions since this may raise safety and security concerns for the family or business. Do ask general questions such as:

1. Maximum number of residents or employees in the structure at peak times of the day;
2. Location of shutoff valves for gas, water and electric utilities (mark these on maps or sketches);
3. If the structure is insured (do not ask insurance company name or specific coverage);
4. If the family or business has an evacuation and response plan (no specifics though);
5. If the family or business has 72 hour kits;
6. If family members or business employees have special skills that they would lend your team in the event of a major disaster;
7. If family members or business employees have been CERT trained (if yes, ask if they wish to join your team. If no, ask if they wish to get training and join your team.);
8. If there are any special hazards inside or outside the structure such as propane tanks, wells or hazardous materials that may pose a safety or health risk to disaster workers;
9. If the family or business wants your team's help after a major disaster or emergency event. (This gives the opportunity to decline assistance for religious or other reasons. Do not ask why if they decline assistance. It also protects you and your team from criminal trespass and other charges or law suits.)

Each interview unit should introduce themselves as the neighborhood's emergency response team. They should briefly explain the CERT program and purpose then explain the purpose of the interview they wish to conduct. If the resident or manager is unwilling to participate, simply thank them for their time and move on. Eventually, after hearing more about your team's efforts and successes, they may contact you asking how they can help the team.

Writing the Plan

Once the drill has been completed and the information compiled, you are ready to begin writing the plan. Begin by contacting your local government's emergency manager. Ask for a list of disaster service agencies complete with brief descriptions of available resources or services and local contact names, phones and e-mails. You might wish to include contacts for other community groups such as neighborhood watch or even nonprofit groups in your area. These are the people that your team can contact during a response to secure special services and such for your neighbors. For example, the Red Cross Chapter manager should be in the list! The Red Cross provides food, shelter and clothing as part of their Disaster Services for both large and small scale disasters. They also can provide counseling services. For disasters that do not call for a full CERT response (such as a house fire), any team member can open the plan and immediately find the Red Cross listing. One call to the local chapter gets the needed help for the neighbor and the CERT mission is fulfilled.

The second chapter of your plan is a risk assessment for your neighborhood or community. This chapter describes the various disaster types that your community is likely to face in the order of most to least severe or frequent. Your plan should be written to address all disaster types and describing them in a prioritized manner will help you focus on the other activities of the team such as cache development. Once you have defined the risks, you can begin developing "wish lists" that your team can procure over time.

The third chapter describes the team organization or structure. It contains a description of the various leadership positions in the team and their duties during a response. For example, your plan might specify that the team's treasurer is to function as the logistics section chief when mobilized. The logistics section chief is responsible for gathering resources in the staging area and distributing them as needed to other team units. Since the treasurer has the "check book", it is incumbent on him or her to document all expenditures during an activation. It might also be prudent to discuss in this description what forms of documentation need to be channeled through which team officer. When a team does activate, it is likely for a fair length of time. Therefore, this chapter should also contain descriptions of shift schedules, team briefings and other management issues.

The fourth chapter describes the circumstances which will activate the team. In some municipalities, CERTs are only activated by a call from the municipality's Emergency Manager, whereas in other areas, CERTs are self activating. It is suggested here that this chapter simply list each disaster identified in the previous chapter 2, specify the activation method and give a few examples to clarify when a team member should go to the assembly area. For example, you might specify that after an earthquake, each team member is to secure their home and family, then perform a damage assessment as they move toward the team assembly point. If there is a wild fire at the edge of town, you might specify that team members respond only when called by the team leadership or the local emergency manager. If flooding is immanent, you might specify that team members self activate to assist neighbors in evacuation or sand bagging.

The fifth chapter describes the resources available from your cache site as well as the location(s) of the cache(s). Following this cache information should be a list of other resources offered or volunteered by neighbors during the interviews your team performed during the drill. These resources should include not only equipment and supplies, but, community members with special skills that might aid your team in achieving certain goals. For example, your interviews showed that Doctor Jones (the world's foremost heart surgeon) lives in your team's service area, has offered to assist your team if available, and has a large supply of gauze dressings and bandages available at his home. If I were the team's Medical Chief, I would certainly want to see if this person were available.

The sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth chapters can be simply copies of the appropriate sections of the CERT Training Manual, or supplements to those sections which use data from the interview drill. The Search & Rescue supplement might specify that SAR Units check the local elementary school first then move on to the local mall, and so forth. The Medical Operations supplement might specify special procedures for those neighbors with known disabilities or chronic illnesses. The Fire Suppression supplement might list locations where known fire hazards exist and specify whether or not to attempt fire suppression. The Communications & Documentation supplement might list all known ham radio stations in the area and specify the use of certain documentation.

Chapter ten is where your team, in cooperation with local civil authorities, specifies the various routes which the community might use to evacuate. Several evacuation routes might be defined for different disasters, but remember, the purpose of evacuation is to get as many people as far away from the scene as quickly as possible. For example, the western edge of your neighborhood borders a railroad or freeway. The hazard to be planned for here is a toxic chemical accident that forces an evacuation. Winds usually blow west to east, so, your team would select routes which move neighbors to the north and/or south.

Chapter eleven is where you define any special operations or procedures to be used when the team activates. For example, a large park is located across the street from a major sporting goods retailer. If your team chose to set up a tent city for sheltering, this chapter would specify who (perhaps the logistics chief) would approach the retailer for a donation of tents and other items, where (most likely the park), and how (separation between tents and pathways) the shelter is to be set up and arranged. This chapter might also address sanitation procedures and locations of dumps, or any other operation or procedure not addressed in the previous chapters.

Written Emergency Response Plan, Suggested Format

Table of Contents

Chapter	Title	Description
1	Agency Coordination	Lists of government and private or nonprofit agencies with contact names and phone numbers.
2	Pre-disaster Risk Assessments	Describe in this chapter which "disasters" your community will likely face. Arrange the descriptions beginning with the "worst case disaster" for which this plan is being written. * Hold a team drill to canvas the neighborhood and identify different locations that may place team members at risk (i.e.; propane tanks, etc.).
3	Team Management Plan	This chapter specifies the Team's organizational structure. It defines the duties of each team officer when responding to a disaster. For example, the Team Treasurer might be assigned as the Logistics Section Chief when responding. You should also include descriptions for additional team officer positions (i.e.; Public Relations, mass care) if they are part of your team organization. Also include shift schedules in terms of duty hours that should be implemented.
4	Mobilization	Describes how the team will be mobilized and where the team will assemble. Can include team member contact information or roster. Should list the different section chiefs by name.
5	Cache Sites & Resources	This chapter should identify cache locations, inventories of current equipment and supplies, and a current list of resources available from community members. Don't forget to include considerations for food and water. Many Restaurants may provide food and water for mass care operations.
6	Search and Rescue Operations	Lists the areas in priority that should be checked. For example, there may be a school and a senior care center. If the school has their own team, the center may become first priority.
7	Medical Operations	Identifies the authority structure of the medical section personnel; the locations of the treatment, triage and morgue areas; documentation requirements; and special procedures for disabled or elderly care.
8	Fire Suppression Operations	Describes the various fire hazards identified in the drill suggested in chapter 2 and any special action procedures for them. Remember team safety is paramount!
9	Communications and Documentation	Describes the communications plan, including what radios and frequencies would be used, alternate methods such as runners and what documentation should be kept.
10	Evacuation Routes and Procedures	Describes the routes of evacuation out of the community and details the special needs neighbors that SAR Teams will need to check on as the evacuation progresses.
11	Special Operations & Procedures	Describe here any special operations (i.e.; damage assessment) or procedures (i.e.; sheltering, mass feeding, waste disposal, etc.) that may be necessary during any response.