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Wayland Town Crier Guest Column

Community Emergency Response Teams Formed in Wayland

By Gary M. Slep

The Wayland Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC), as the designated Citizen Corp Council, has formed a volunteer citizens community self-help program to assist first responders in the event the town is faced with a widespread emergency that might overwhelm the existing system.

Looking back at events such as the World Trade Center in NYC and Hurricane Katrina, it is evident that in some situations – especially those that affect the entire region – first responders from Wayland and the surrounding towns might not be able to assist all of the town's residents without a trained volunteer organization to support them. Federal and state governments might be overburdened by the extent of damage and loss of life in a widespread emergency. In such an event emergency personnel might not be able to provide a fully effective and timely response to all affected areas.

Like other towns in this region, Wayland is subject to widespread disasters such as severe ice storms, blizzards, hurricanes, hailstorms, long-term power outages, hundreds of fallen trees blocking roadways, and evacuations from surrounding metropolitan areas. Floods periodically isolate sections of the town. The region is in a severe earthquake zone with the potential for considerable property damage and loss of life. With major gas pipelines and MWRA tunnels running under the town, and the turnpike running through town, Wayland could experience serious fires, environmental damage, and toxic chemical releases. And no one anywhere is safe from acts of terrorism or pandemics.

To address these issues in a proactive manner, and with the enthusiastic support of town officials, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), and our Local Emergency Planning Committee, Wayland has created Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT), based on a model utilized by the Department of Homeland Security. Wayland's incipient CERT team was founded earlier this year; the first volunteers were trained in April 2006. With a CERT in Wayland, there is the expectation that these trained volunteers will be able to free up our first responders to ensure that there will be fewer cases of loss of life and less economic damage. CERT will enable the community to rely on its own resources until outside help arrives. The teams are part of the federal Citizen Corps and Wayland's own Community Action Program, which was created in 2003.

CERTs are volunteer citizen groups, trained to support full-time emergency response agencies and departments. They are activated through an incident command system (ICS) during an emergency. Each member of a CERT team brings with him or her various skills and levels of expertise that can be useful in an emergency. Each team member may specialize in one or more activities but is cross-trained in other disciplines.

CERT members carry emergency kits and photo identification badges provided by the town. Each CERT unit has a team leader who reports to the operations chief, who, in turn, reports to the incident commander.

A CERT team is given specific tasks to accomplish by the operations chief. CERT teams will be used to assist with search and rescue, perform shelter operations, provide on-site medical management, and assist first responders with various tasks such as logistics, relieving professionals to deal with the more severe situations. CERT volunteers are trained to deal with all types of emergencies and circumstances.

A search and rescue CERT team, for example, might enter relatively undamaged buildings looking for survivors of an earthquake or flood. Upon finding an injured, handicapped, or special needs individual, a CERT team would remove the person to safety. A medical CERT team would perform triage on victims removed by the CERT search and rescue team. Members will mark buildings as having been searched once they are through with the structures. An important part of the job is assessing each designated structure for damage and determining how many persons have been accounted for or are still missing.

The teams will provide comfort to victims, including psychological assistance and basic needs. Members might help victims or those left homeless by bringing them water and nourishment, blankets, medications, or oxygen or taking them to CERT-managed shelters. They may help victims get in touch with family or government agencies.

Should a pandemic occur, CERT teams might be called upon to help public health officials isolate and control the disease, provide logistical assistance, distribute gloves and masks, support temporary medical shelters, and provide food, medications and comfort to victims and shut-ins.

Teams always perform only those tasks that the incident commander, the CERT safety officer, and the operations chief assess to be safe for them to perform. Team safety is always given the highest priority.

One of the most important tasks the teams may be called upon to do in any emergency is to assist with communications so citizens can help themselves. Informed citizens tend not to panic and to cope better with their loss and frustrations. Solid communications can save lives and reunite families and the community.

The CERT concept began in 1985 in Los Angeles. Since then, the program has spread nationwide in conjunction with the Los Angeles Fire Department, FEMA, and the Emergency Management Institute. CERT units can help communities reduce loss of life and property damage. They are an important part of any community's emergency services. Although teams are trained in their own communities, they may, once trained, offer to help in any disaster anywhere in the country.

The next CERT training is scheduled to begin the evening of September 18 running through October. Most sessions will be in the evening, with a few Saturday morning training classes. To find out more about this program, contact Gale McNiff, LEPC Chair and CERT coordinator: waylandcert@aol.com.

Please consider volunteering to be part of this important emergency response team.

Gary Slep is the Safety Officer for Wayland CERT.