

CERT Tackles Disaster Psychology, Closer to Full Certification



(C. Proxmire, Ferndale 115 News, July 22, 2012)

Volunteers on the [Ferndale CERT \(Community Emergency Response Team\)](#) team have been [working hard the past six months](#) to acquire the necessary tools to do effective search and rescue and disaster response. The team will be ready to assist the Ferndale Fire Department in emergencies, but also to help with large events.

Over 50 residents have stepped forward to join the team, which is just two more lessons away from the first round of certifications.

On July 21 fourteen of them met at the fire station on Livernois to learn about disaster psychology.

Fire Chief Kevin Sullivan, who taught the class, explained that CERT members need to be prepared to handle a variety of human psychological reactions to high-stress situations – including those of victims, family members and even in themselves.

To begin, rescue workers should have an awareness about themselves before going into a stressful, potentially traumatic experience.

The first step is to take an inventory of personal losses or trauma, thinking of how those might pop back up.

“Be aware that you can be transported back,” Sullivan said. “Sometimes a smell, or a feeling of being trapped, or a sound can bring everything back. It’s like you’re in a time machine and all of a sudden you’re there again.”

Another stress factor in emergencies is that CERT volunteers will be working in their own neighborhoods. “These are going

to people you may know, that may be hurt or even deceased," he said.

✘ CERT trainees were taught to recognize the signs of trauma, including irritability or anger, blame of self or others, isolation and withdrawal, fear of recurrence, feeling stunned, numbed or overwhelmed or feeling helpless. Other symptoms are mood swings, depression or grief, denial that anything is wrong, concentration or memory problems, or relationship problems.

Some more physical signs include loss of appetite, headaches or chest pain, diarrhea, stomach pain, nausea or hyperactivity. Long term symptoms could be an increase in drug or alcohol use, nightmares, insomnia or fatigue.

"If we see someone off in a corner, we leave them alone for a little bit but this is what we really look for. When people feel hopeless, the best thing we can do is remember, 'we didn't cause this, but we will make the best of it.'"

He explained that actions can be taken before, during and after an incident to "help manage emotional impact of disaster response work." Before an incident workers can stay healthy and deal with their emotional issues. During an emergency they should stay hydrated and well-fed. And after they can take part in a stress debriefing. ✘

For major emergencies, someone will be in charge of team well-being. Other ways individuals can increase their stress threshold are to learn how to take 15 minute rests, balance work, play and rest in their lives, allow themselves to receive as well as to give, how to connect with others, how to meditate or pray and how to use whatever spiritual resources work for them.

In the midst of an emergency, teams can remain healthy by having debriefings to keep people informed, rotating teams and

duties to prevent burnout, and phasing workers out gradually when able.

The teambuilding exercises done by CERT not only teach them the technical skills of rescue work, it helps them to get to know each other and to have trust already established by the time they reach the field. They'll be able to spot when someone is acting out of character.

Traveling in groups of two or three give volunteers someone to look out for them. In addition to making sure team members are secure, there may be victims and bystanders to deal with.

Stabilizing victims is a primary responsibility of rescue workers. They may need to treat the victim's injury or shock, get uninjured people to help, listen and empathize, and connect victims to support systems. They may also have to separate victims from their families, particularly if family members are not acting rationally. "People do a lot of strange things in grief," Sullivan said. In emergency situations when trying to help people, Sullivan has been punched, spat on, bitten by dogs and people, and even had salt thrown in his face.

Rescue workers should not try to move dead bodies, and they should try and prevent family members from doing so also. Even in natural disasters, all bodies should be treated as if in a crime scene. Rescue workers should cover and protect the body if possible, but any movement should be done by police or other authorities.

"If you have to inform family or friends of death, you should separate the family members and tell one person. Have the person sit down, make eye contact and say "I'm sorry, but your family member has died. I am so sorry.'" Don't use any of those fancy euphemisms because when people are in shock they won't hear what you are saying. You need to be direct. And then give family and friends their space to grieve."

Police, fire and other rescue workers often speak with frankness or even humor about the sometime gruesome experiences they have, and those who face tragedies or trauma can use that as a way to release emotions as well, though preferably not around those who are grieving in other ways.

Overall the goal of any rescue mission is that everybody walks away. If rescue workers do not care for themselves and each other, it can put everybody at risk or have long-term effects.

One of the most disheartening, and under-reported, stories that Sullivan shared was that of the Baby Jessica rescue back in 1987. This was a very high-stress rescue with the media swarming about in the Texas farmland to televise the rescue efforts. Baby Jessica McClure, just 18 months old, had fallen down a well, and rescue workers had to drill a parallel well, and then hand-dig a tunnel over to the trapped child. A young, thinly-built paramedic named Robert O'Donnell was selected to crawl through and pull the baby to safety.

With the world watching, O'Donnell pulled down on the baby to free her, accidentally breaking her leg. The wailing of the child proved too much and the rescue worker faced a panic attack while in the tiny tunnel, Sullivan said.

☒ Those up top calmed him down and he was able to get Baby Jessica free. He placed her in the rescue bucket and sent her back to the surface. And then he was alone. The lights went out and above ground in the clamor to see the baby, O'Donnell was essentially abandoned underground in the dark. The time may have been short, but Sullivan speculates that it must have felt like years to the already panicked paramedic.

When he emerged from the harrowing tunnel, he was instantly a hero. The press swarmed him and hounded his life for several weeks. He could not escape the limelight and then finally some other story happened and they all went away. Eventually the hero of the Baby Jessica languished with an addiction to

painkillers and alcohol, until eight years later, when the Oklahoma bombings occurred, O'Donnell [used a shotgun to take his own life.](#)

These kinds of stories are not uncommon, although they are often un-reported. Sullivan had harsh words for the sensationalist media that exploits the stories of those in tragedy, and recalled an incident in Ferndale where reporters continued to violate the safety and civility of a tragic fire scene some years ago.

He also noted that professional rescue workers have a variety of ways they deal with the heavy emotions that can come along with the job. Ideally Fire and Police will be handling the worst incidents in the field, but the potential is there for volunteers to find themselves in emotionally taxing situations. Recognizing that each individual is human and has very real psychological and physical needs is a great start in maintaining good mental health, as is knowing when to step back and when to ask for help. 

CERT will be called in if there are large emergencies like natural disasters or school shootings. They will also be deployed when storms knock down power lines or cause other damage, and they will help at events and possibly do trainings for the public about things like fire safety and survival skills.

The volunteer program requires several months of training and a commitment to step up when called. Training includes basic first aid, search and rescue, fire safety, proper communications, disaster preparedness and terrorism. Pat Landry and his son Trevor, who is sixteen, are among about ten volunteers who are also involved with local Boy Scout Troop 1542. "I can't wait to deploy to go help. Not necessarily to an emergency, but the Dream Cruise or DIY [Do It Yourself Art Fair], to let the community know we're here," Pat said. He and Trevor are essentially inseparable because Trevor is a

minor.

“When you’re a Boy Scout you know you get to help people, but with this you get to meet more people you’ve never met and you won’t know what to expect,” Trevor said.

Over the July 4th weekend a half dozen CERT members got their first taste of civic responsibility when [they manned the 24 hour cooling center](#) inside the Kulick Community Center. Trainers Patricia Cissell and Sherry Kruzman-Martin led the first CERT effort, with Cissell calling in for cots from the Red Cross, where she also volunteers, and Kruzman-Martin organizing contact lists and phoning in for reinforcements. The group is not officially certified, so they were limited to watching the cooling center. But with just two more classes to go, background checks completed, and photo IDs in the works, they will be ready and official by the end of summer.

If you are interested in being part of the next round of CERT training, contact Fire Chief Kevin Sullivan at ferndalecert@ferndalefirerescue.org.

CERT programs are organized through The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and money may be available through Federal, State or County grants. For more information go to <http://www.citizencorps.gov/cert/index.shtm>.

