



# Getting Prepared!

*NYSAFC Past President Carl Amato Jr.*

**A** Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) is always on duty. When you live in Florida, particularly in Hernando County near Tampa Bay, that means storms. A major concern here is annual hurricane season from June to November. But CERT teams throughout the country must always remain vigilant and can assist their communities whenever a major disaster or crisis occurs. CERT members are trained for disasters. But how much can you practice? We have been fortunate and have been spared from a major disaster since 2004, while other areas of the Southeast have been ravaged. My background is fire and emergency services, and as you all know we always train for disasters and respond to them daily to some degree. CERT teams are trained to be a volunteer first response team when the professionals are unable to respond to the area you are protecting if you are overwhelmed in your present response operations. CERT teams are filling the gap as an emergency force multiplier to respond and protect our own communities. They perform an assessment of the damage, aid residents, and establish a safe zone. They also provide needed information to responding emergency professionals and the county emergency operations center.

CERT members must be aware of interoperability, not only within the community (for my local team this includes a board of directors, general manager, access patrol, grounds and maintenance personnel), but also within the region. In an emergency situation these include fire/rescue agencies, law enforcement agencies, state public services, utilities, the National Guard, medical facilities, the Red Cross, and the Coast Guard.

My own CERT team, Timber Pines, is within a senior gated community comprised of 6,000 residents, 3,450 1-story single family homes, villas, and duplexes on 1,400 acres. The terrain includes hills and lakes. Because of the size of the community and the high and low land, when we activate the team it requires two command posts. The team is organized with a team leader who is also an incident commander. There are section leaders for medical operations, search and rescue, and damage assessment/fire suppression. There is supporting staff for administration/accountability, safety and radio communications. The team is composed of 40 residents with the average age of 65. This is a Citizen Corp., similar to what I remember during World War II – the Civil Defense volunteers. Our board of directors has provided funding for portable radios, incident command maps, rain gear, and administrative support. We also have use of golf cart carry alls and a patrol pick-up truck. A team activation protocol has been developed to include emergency notifications, operations, communications, and deployment.

The interest in the CERT process is the same as the fire service volunteer recruitment and retention efforts. Our retirement community, consisting of seniors and snowbirds, includes many active residents with full calendars. But a main interest is volunteering for hospitals and other agencies. I was given permission by the board to form the CERT in January 2004. We recruited and trained 30 members. Today we stand at 40 with 20 remaining from the original team. To recruit residents into CERT is a never-ending advertising

campaign. We don't have a fire house to show them, just some friends and neighbors who have joined the pool of people to take care of our community. To enlist people who are required to take the required FEMA training of 21 hours of classroom, practical, and hands-on training is difficult.

When you recruit new members to join, you must keep them interested because waiting for a disaster is boring and maybe it never comes. In addition to hurricanes, we also have a wide range of possible complex situations

– tornadoes, commercial airport traffic, and haz-mat transporters.

Hernando County provides training and materials for volunteers, which follow the FEMA program. Florida has 205 teams. Once volunteers have completed training they are assigned to a team in their area. Recruitment and retention becomes the local CERT's responsibility. As in the fire service, our team of residents come from various professions and backgrounds, bringing with them unique talents and abilities. They are nurses, doctors, fire/EMS personnel, retired military and law enforcement personnel, federal government employees, and from the private business sector. Within the county, there are many recognition events to help promote and encourage volunteerism.

A function that is always active and goes with disaster preparation and response is education and communication. It is important to keep the team active and to communicate with our community. We have an area in our library, a monthly column in the community newsletter, and TV announcements. Educational material is distributed at various events. Residents are provided with hurricane safety tips, free home inspections for security and storm improvements, and other safety information.

In New York, there are 48 CERT teams located in counties, towns, and cities in all regions of the state. There is also a CERT in each of the counties comprising New York City. The first, which was formed after September 11, 2001, was Battery Park CERT.

For more information on CERT, visit [www.citizen corps.gov/cert](http://www.citizen corps.gov/cert). Look under the New York state file for information on your local Community Emergency Response Team to see how you can participate or how your department can take advantage of this valuable resource during an emergency. ●

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

*Carl Amato is an ex-chief of the Deer Park Vol. Fire Department in Suffolk County and past president (1994-1995) of the New York State Association of Fire Chiefs. He is a 50-year member of the fire service in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. A member of CERT since 2003, Amato is presently a CERT team leader in Hernando County (FL).*