

The Connection

Hurricane Isabel An Icebreaker For Arlington County CERT Winter 2004

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As the winds from September's Hurricane Isabel were still gusting, Arlington County (VA) CERT members were activated for the first time ever to distribute ice to citizens who were left without power in the storm's aftermath. Over half of the county's trained CERT members responded to the call on Friday, September 19 ... an especially great turnout considering many were bailing out their own basements, patching their own roofs, moving fallen trees, and surveying damage to their own properties at the time. Over a four-day period, Arlington CERT members unloaded and distributed about 60,000 lbs. of ice to citizens from the parking lots of two high schools, an elementary school, and a Harris-Teeter grocery store. They also delivered a few pallets directly to one of the hardest-hit neighborhoods. The ice was brought in from outside the county and provided by the National Guard and the U.S. Army.

In addition to ice duties, a handful of CERT members were called upon to mark downed power lines throughout the county and many others aided in reporting power outages and distributing flyers regarding food storage and power outages to citizens. County officials, Arlington County Office of Emergency Management staff, and members of the Arlington County Fire Department (sponsors of the CERT program) -- as well as grateful members of the community -- were very impressed with the group's performance. This was certainly the team's icebreaker in more ways than one!

CERT training in Arlington County began just two weeks after the one year anniversary of the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, which is located in the county. The first team was made up of residents of the neighborhoods immediately south of the Pentagon, many of whom heard and felt the attack and wanted to acquire skills that would enable them to help out in future emergencies. Since that time, over 100 residents have completed their CERT training and teams have been established in many neighborhoods throughout the county. CERT is also turning out to be a family affair in Arlington, with many spouses/partners attending the training together and even a few parents attending with their adult children. There are also a number of business CERTs in the county and more planned for the future.

In addition to training as many interested residents as possible, the folks in Arlington are also focusing on refreshing and building upon the skills of existing CERT members. Workshops in incident command structure, traffic direction, moulage, and animals in disaster are on the agenda for the not-too-distant future. Proximity to Washington, DC also provides opportunities for CERT members to participate in various emergency preparedness activities and drills.

The county and its CERT coordinators are also looking into ways of activating the CERT using the ROAM alert system that distributes alerts to citizens via computer and text messaging. The use of such technology will be faster and less labor intensive than using the current phone trees.

The growing Arlington County CERT and its many members are proud to be a part of the nationwide CERT family. Be safe, be well and have a happy holiday season.