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GOOD STORY

Boca Raton CERT's Breakfast With Firefighters Program

SUMMARY

Boca Raton started a "Breakfast with Firefighters" program in order to strengthen the relationship between the Boca Raton Fire Department (BRFD) and Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT). In Phase 1 of the program, every fire station in the city was briefed on CERT and its function. In Phase 2, which is currently being carried out, CERT members are invited to their local fire station on Saturdays, where they participate in Saturday morning equipment checks and station maintenance and learn about firefighters' jobs. By building relationships between the BRFD and CERT, Boca Raton is setting the stage for successful BRFD/CERT cooperation and combating the skepticism with which many emergency responders view CERT.

BACKGROUND

The CERT program offers basic emergency response training to citizens. The theory behind CERT is that during a major disaster, professional emergency responders will be overwhelmed, and citizens may have to rely on themselves and their neighbors for the first few hours, or even days. Citizens can provide valuable support during an emergency, but responding without training is dangerous. During the Mexico City earthquake, for example, untrained volunteers saved 800 lives, but 100 of those volunteers were themselves killed. CERT training gives citizens the skills and knowledge they need to deal with a crisis when professional assistance is unavailable.

Many professional emergency responders, however, are unaware of the CERT program. Those that do know about CERT's existence have rarely worked with CERT volunteers. One effect of the lack of familiarity between CERT and professional responders is widespread skepticism of volunteers. Kerry Baum, the head of CERT at Brigham Young University, reports that, "the biggest problem using CERTs is getting the professional responders to accept the CERTs initially. Once they've worked with them for a while and figure out what they know, they're more willing to cooperate. If it's the first time that a responder has worked with the volunteers, they're a little bit skeptical."

Boca Raton has an exceptionally strong CERT program. Boca Raton CERT members participate in regular meetings, continuing education, and drills. Despite the fact that Boca Raton CERT is unusually active, Frank Correggio, the Public Information Officer for BRFD, realized that Boca Raton firefighters knew little or nothing about this potentially useful asset. "A lot of firefighters, believe it or not, are kind of in the dark," Correggio explains. "Their jobs are so demanding that they're just not aware of the many different community programs that the fire department is involved in."

Correggio approached Lieutenant Cindy Metcalf, CERT Program Coordinator, about the issue. The two of them discussed the issue with Fire Chief Bruce Silk. Correggio, Metcalf, and Silk decided that a simple introduction and shared meal could set the stage for future

cooperation between professional responders and CERT in Boca Raton. With Silk's approval, Correggio launched the Breakfast with Firefighters program, a remarkably simple, no-cost program that seeks to bridge the gap between CERT and professional responders.

GOALS

The program's primary goal is to increase firefighters' understanding of CERT. If firefighters and CERT are to work together productively in an emergency, firefighters need to know what to expect from CERT. Firefighters must understand CERT members' capabilities and limitations. Fire stations should know which CERT team works in their neighborhood, and who leads that team. Firefighters should also be familiar with CERT uniforms and ID badges, so that during a crisis they can identify CERT members whom they do not know personally.

Breakfast with Firefighters also seeks to educate CERT members about firefighters. CERT members can do their jobs better if they understand what firefighters need to know when they arrive to take control. The more CERT members know about firefighters, the more likely they are to act as the fire department's ambassadors to the community. CERT members in Boca Raton can now discuss the fire department with their neighbors, and share information about the local fire station's members and activities. That sense of connection between citizens and firefighters strengthens support for the BFRD within the taxpaying community.

DESCRIPTION

Educate Firefighters about CERT

Correggio started by briefing each fire station in the city about CERT. He gave a short talk to the firefighters, and then answered questions. He was able to correct several widespread misconceptions about CERT. He developed a packet of information about CERT training and the function of CERT teams and left one at each fire station. The packet includes a roster of members of the local CERT team, as well as the name of the team leader. The packet, Correggio hopes, will be a useful tool for firefighters who work with CERT teams.

Educate CERT Members about Firefighters

On the appointed Saturday, CERT members arrive at the station, where they are integrated into the firefighters' morning routine. They arrive at shift change, sit through roll call, and help the firefighters check their equipment.

Develop CERT/Firefighter Relations

Five groups of CERT leaders have attended Breakfast with Firefighters. Boca Raton CERT plans to continue the program so that all members of Boca Raton's 16 CERT teams have a chance to participate. The entire Boca Raton CERT membership will be briefed on the results of the program at the biannual Boca CERT meeting in June of 2004. The breakfasts were an extremely rewarding experience for CERT members and firefighters, and CERT leaders plan to build on the relationships that were developed. Now that the BFRD and CERT have built a mutually respectful relationship, they can move on to operational cooperation during drills and exercises.

REQUIREMENTS

Key to Success

Breakfast with Firefighters could not have succeeded in convincing Boca Raton's firefighters that their local CERT teams were worthy of respect if Boca CERT were not such an excellent program. A CERT team must be hardworking and organized if it is to work cooperatively with its local fire department. CERT members must also show firefighters that they understand the sacrifices firefighters are willing to make for their communities. "Firefighters are putting their lives on the line when they go out there, and your CERT people have to be so respectful," says CERT leader Barbara Kasser.

Resources

Breakfast with Firefighters can be run with extremely limited resources. The program must be organized by a leader who is respected by the fire department and knowledgeable about CERT. In the case of Boca Raton, that leader, Frank Correggio, is a 27-year veteran firefighter, which made it easier for him to brief firefighters about CERT. After the firefighters have been briefed, the demands on the program leader's time are minimal and administrative in nature. Breakfast with Firefighters requires no financial investment from either the government or the fire department. "When I went around to the stations and told [firefighters] about the program and what I wanted to do, not one of the 171 firefighters asked who was going to pay for the breakfast," says Correggio. Firefighters paid for the breakfasts themselves, and would not even let CERT members help with the dishes.

Links

Boca Raton Fire Department: <http://tinyurl.com/2hptw>

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