

Arlington Sun Gazette
Arlington Creates New Citizens' Preparedness Council
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Arlington County officials on Friday announced plans for a "Citizen Corps Council," designed to bridge the gap between local residents and the county government in case of future emergencies.

The new council evolved out of discussions held in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the Pentagon. While county officials found most of their response to that day effective, they acknowledge coming up short on public information.

"The county's biggest challenge . . . was informing residents," County Board Chairman Chris Zimmerman said at a press conference held Sept. 6. "Our communications with the public are not adequate for the new challenges that we face."

Membership in the new Citizens Corps Council will include representatives from civic, community and business groups. Jackie Snelling, who headed up a county preparedness task force, has been named chairman of the new group.

"Citizens who are prepared and have basic training can protect themselves and help others," said Snelling, who is a leader of the Arlington County Civic Federation.

"Education and basic training saves lives."

Instead of being merely an advisory body, the new group will "work hand-in-hand" with top county officials and public safety agencies to coordinate preparedness measures.

"They will be integrated into our emergency operations," County Manager Ron Carlee said. Members will be appointed in coming weeks, Carlee said.

Carlee said lessons learned from the Sept. 11 attack on the Pentagon showed that the county's public communication with residents was adequate for an earlier era, but not sufficient today.

"We tried a number of new and creative efforts last year, [but] Arlington needed to take public preparedness to another level," he said.

Snelling said she hoped the group would encompass a broad membership.

"We are fortunate to live in a community that values public service and promotes a strong partnership between citizens and government," she said.

County officials last week also announced that the county will hold Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training classes for local residents interested in learning how they can better prepare themselves, their businesses and their neighborhoods for disasters.

The pilot session will begin on Sept. 25, and will be limited to 20 participants, but future programs are expected to train hundreds.

"It's neighbors helping neighbors," said Kim Smith, co-chairman of the Civic Federation's public safety committee.

The curriculum is provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and will be taught by county employees and the nonprofit sector.

For information on the Citizens Corps Council or CERT training, call Capt. Clare Halsey at (703) 228-3571.