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GOOD STORY

Washington, DC's Emergency Volunteer Traffic Corps

SUMMARY

The Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and Citizen Corps DC worked together to train volunteers to direct traffic during emergencies, relieving demands on police officers' time. The Emergency Volunteer Traffic Corps (E-VTC) was launched during the World War II Memorial dedication in May of 2004.

BACKGROUND

Traffic control was one of the MPD's biggest challenges when Hurricane Isabelle hit DC in September of 2003. The storm caused power-outages that lasted for several days in some areas; as a result, a significant portion of DC's traffic signal lights were disabled. Many of MPD's on-duty officers had to be deployed to the affected intersections to direct traffic. Even with large numbers of officers controlling traffic, many intersections remained unmanned, increasing confusion, frustration, and danger for citizens. Traffic direction drained MPD manpower to the point where responding adequately to the hurricane was difficult.

As a result of these difficulties, MPD Chief Charles Ramsay realized that DC required more resources for traffic control during emergencies. He decided to investigate the possibility of training Citizen Corps volunteers to direct traffic. Ramsay was confident in the abilities of DC's Citizen Corps volunteers, who were already making an important contribution to the city's law enforcement and emergency response efforts through the Metropolitan Police Reserve Corps. The Police Reserve Corps is a volunteer program providing qualified civic-minded individuals with the opportunity to assist the MPD in carrying out its policing responsibilities. Office of the Mayor calculates that the 186 Citizen Corps volunteers who participated in the Police Reserve Corps donated a total of 46,000 hours in 2003, the equivalent of \$850,000, or 22 full-time police officers.

The MPD contacted Jerome DuVal, director of Serve DC, the mayoral agency that coordinates DC's Citizen Corps Council. Together, Citizen Corps DC and the MPD created and launched the Emergency Volunteer Traffic Corps.

GOALS

The goal of the E-VTC program is to provide Washington, DC with a group of people qualified to control traffic flow during emergencies so that the city will not have to deploy police officers to intersections.

DESCRIPTION

The E-VTC is a group of police reserve officers and Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) volunteers trained to work together in teams to direct traffic during emergencies.

E-VTC members are not authorized to write tickets or make arrests—their role is primarily to provide information and guidance to citizens.

Plan Cooperatively

The MPD and Citizen Corps DC made a concerted effort to include all relevant organizations in developing plans for the E-VTC. The planning group, which began meeting in March of 2004, included representatives from the DC Emergency Management Agency (DC EMA) and the District Department of Transportation (DDOT), in addition to Citizen Corps DC and the MPD. After some discussion, the group decided that the best option was to train and deploy CERT members in cooperation with Police Reserve Officers, who are already trained to direct traffic as part of their work with the MPD. The E-VTC organizers chose to work with CERT members because there are a large number of them in the city and because they are trained to work in emergency conditions. Utilizing CERT members greatly expanded the number of available volunteers without requiring every participant to complete the extensive training necessary for Police Reserve Corps officers.

Design Training Carefully

The planning group started with the 40-hour Police Reserve Corps curriculum as a model. The final E-VTC curriculum consisted of 9 hours of instructional material:

- Introduction to CERT's role in E-VTC (*led by DC's CERT Manager*)
- Discussion of traffic evacuation routes (*DDOT representative*)
- Police Reserve Corps role in E-VTC (*Police Reserve Corps Coordinator*)
- Traffic Direction video
- Discussion of basic traffic rules and regulations (*reserve officers*)
- Hands-on training demonstrating traffic control techniques (*reserve officers*)
- Discussion of logistics and participants' expectations (*Serve DC Director*)

Rather than take on the role of instructors themselves, E-VTC organizers decided to use a train-the-trainer model. The 25 reserve officers participating in the program were trained at the MPD's Institute of Police Science over the course of two Saturdays. The reserve officers then trained the 25 participating CERT members during the next two Saturdays. The train-the-trainer approach laid the groundwork for cost-efficient training of large numbers of CERT members and fostered respectful, collaborative relationships between CERT volunteers and their reserve officer supervisors.

Deploy Immediately

E-VTC organizers decided to test the program immediately after the initial class's training was complete. They selected the World War II Memorial Dedication in May of 2004 for the E-VTC's trial run. In preparation for the initial deployment, the DC EMA collected the cell phone numbers of all volunteers so that the city's text paging system could be used to contact them in case of an emergency.

On the day of the dedication ceremony, 50 volunteers were deployed to 12 intersections in teams of three or four. The 50 volunteers directed pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic for 2 shifts totaling 12 hours. High volume intersections, which DDOT identified in advance, were covered by more volunteers. Each team included both CERT members and reserve officers. Both the reserve officers and the CERT members wore the visibility vests that are part of their Citizen Corps equipment. The reserve officers were also equipped with radios, which they are trained to use to call for support when a citizen requests assistance that reserve officers are not authorized to provide. The teams were supervised by DuVal and two other

Serve DC employees. Participating sergeants and captains from the Police Reserve Corps assisted in managing the volunteers.

The E-VTC's initial deployment was smooth, but not flawless. A CERT member left the scene in a taxi in order to help an elderly gentleman find his car. The CERT member thought he was following the instructions of a reserve officer who had asked him to assist the lost citizen. It took several hours to locate the CERT member, who eventually reported back to police headquarters. E-VTC organizers learned two lessons from this incident. First, E-VTC volunteers need to be told to notify their supervisors before leaving the scene. Second, reserve officers need guidance on how to give appropriate instructions to CERT members. The curriculum will be modified based on these lessons learned before another class of E-VTC volunteers is trained.

Expand on Success

E-VTC organizers plan to deploy the corps several times a year. In addition, Serve DC is integrating the E-VTC into DC's Neighborhood Corps, a new initiative that seeks to organize citizen response to disasters at the neighborhood level. Serve DC's goal is to be able to deploy the E-VTC to direct traffic in the neighborhoods in which they live and work without expending the time necessary to gather volunteers at a centralized deployment location. The DC EMA's text paging system and the Neighborhood Corps program could make this goal a reality.

REQUIREMENTS

Keys to Success

- **A dedicated and successful Citizen Corps Council.** Citizen Corps DC's record of concrete contributions to the city's law-enforcement efforts won Chief Ramsay's respect and ensured that he was eager to work with Citizen Corps on problems such as those that arose during Hurricane Isabelle.
- **Cooperation between volunteer organizations.** Citizen Corps DC's role as coordinator of DC volunteers allowed it to combine volunteer resources from CERT and the Police Reserve Corps to create the E-VTC.
- **Real-world experience.** Deploying the E-VTC to a real event immediately following the completion of the first class's training was important for two reasons. First, it demonstrated to volunteers that their training would be put to use, which increased their enthusiasm for the program. Second, it gave the E-VTC an opportunity to identify problems in the program's structure and correct them before training additional classes. The lessons learned during the World War II Memorial dedication will make E-VTC a stronger program in the future.

Resources

The only equipment used by E-VTC members had already been purchased for them by CERT and the Police Reserve Corps.

Training

CERT members and reserve officers each received 9 hours of training.

Links

- Serve DC: <http://cncs.dc.gov>
- Serve DC. "DC Citizen Corps Establishes Nation's First Emergency Volunteer Traffic Corps." May 27, 2004.

http://cncs.dc.gov/cncs/cwp/view,a,1195,Q,526123,cncsNav_GID,1463,cncsNav,%7C31016%7C.asp

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