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COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM MEMBERS HAPPY TO LEND A HAND

Local volunteers ready when duty calls

By Annette Kingsbury
STAFF WRITER

Michigan is generally free of natural disasters; earthquakes are few, hurricanes non-existent. Even tornadoes rarely cause widespread panic.

But if a major disaster occurred, would you be prepared? Would you know what to do? Could you help a neighbor who needed a hand?

Thanks to a federal grant that came about after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, 100 Rochester Hills residents have been trained in emergency preparedness. The members of the Community Emergency Response Team, known as CERT, received 20 hours of training through the Oakland County Sheriff's office. Since then, they have been working to maintain their skills and stay active.

The idea, according to CERT team member Yvonne Whiteley, is to "prepare to be prepared."

Whiteley is certainly the city's most active CERT team member. Twice in the last few years she has left behind her job and family to go to work for the Federal Emergency Management Agency in Puerto Rico and New Jersey after actual disasters have occurred.

"It was very exciting. I love the job," she said.

Locally, trained CERT volunteers help out at community events such as Festival of the Hills and the Rochester Christmas parade. They help with crowd control and distribute materials about disaster preparedness.

"A lot of times they will do mundane things, but somebody has to do them," said Capt. Bob Smith, commander of the Oakland County Sheriff's Rochester Hills substation. "When we have a situation that is large and a lot of havoc and confusion going on, their training will allow them to do things that are low-risk and free deputies up to go do something else."

"They're a wonderful addition," Rochester Hills Mayor Bryan Barnett said. "They are very connected, very involved."

'IT'S GOOD TO HAVE THEM'

Hills resident Karen Diamond was trained in 2004 after hearing about CERT through her homeowners association.

"I was interested because it was something that trained you in an emergency to be able to help out in your sub," she said.

An employee of 52-3 District Court and The Palace of Auburn Hills, she said, "That training actually can be beneficial to me in all those areas in case of emergency."

Though there is currently no funding for training new CERT volunteers, Smith said the city continues to offer refresher training.

"We try to bring them in and keep them up to date and enhance what they do," he said. "It's good to have them. We don't have the natural disasters like in California, the wildfires, and the regularly scheduled hurricanes like in other states. But when we do have a man-made or Michigan-type disaster, we will plug them in."

Anyone interested in receiving CERT training these days can find it at Oakland University, but at their own

expense. That worries Whiteley, who said she's seen a decrease in participation among those already trained.

"We can't recruit any more," she said. "We depend on events to keep the interest of the volunteers up. ... We need to keep our skills."

Diamond said she plans to stay actively involved.

"Any type of activity you have now that has a large amount of people has the potential to experience a problem," she said. "I like helping other people and I like being involved in what's going on in the community, just to know what I need to do, information I can pass along to other people."

With one son about to go off to college, Whiteley said she can no longer afford to sit home and wait for FEMA's call, so she's looking for a job. But she plans to continue her local CERT work.

"I made it a commitment because I believe in it," she said. "I want residents of the city to know that we are here. ... We're people with green shirts walking down the street. We'd welcome more members."

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