



Columnists

2005: Challenges & Opportunities

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With Hurricane Katrina spotlighting the need for disaster preparedness — and with The City's own history of urban catastrophes always looming — the San Francisco Fire Department's Neighborhood Emergency Response Teams training program (NERT) offers a chance for city residents to prepare for the earthquake that experts predict will occur in coming decades, or for other disasters. NERT coordinator Lt. Erica Arteseros spoke with Examiner editor Zoran Basich this week about the preparedness of city residents.

What is the Neighborhood Emergency Response Team training program? It is a free program for the community designed by the Fire Department to benefit individuals in personal preparedness. It covers a range of things, from disaster medicine to preparing a safety kit to designing an evacuation plan with your family to teaching search-and-rescue techniques. Those are all basic for personal preparedness. The program goes on to describe how residents can work in teams and assist in their neighborhoods and The City at large if they choose. But most important is the personal preparedness program.

How is the course structured? The structure is 18 hours over six sessions. In general, that would be six consecutive Wednesdays or consecutive Saturdays. It begins with an overview of the program and gets into the specifics of personal preparedness that day. The homework from the first class is preparing your kit. We go on to the search-and-rescue portion and the disaster rescue portion.

How long has NERT been around? After the 1989 earthquake, citizens from the Marina who had assisted or who had felt helpless approached the Fire Department and requested the training. It was formalized in 1991. We have had approximately 13,000-14,000 people come through the program and about 8,000 are still on the active list.

What do people need to do to be prepared? Being prepared for disaster takes aforethought. The 18-hour training is very beneficial. But if you did nothing else but take these three steps — prepare an emergency preparedness kit, had a family reunification plan and determined an out-of-state contact — that would be the first step.

One of the things that came up in Hurricane Katrina was that people were in short supply of the basics. So preparing that emergency kit with a purpose is important, where all of your supplies are located in one place when the mandatory evacuation orders come in. It's not necessarily realistic, but if everyone who had gone to the Superdome on New Orleans had brought with them an emergency supply kit, the results would have been drastically different.

The reunification plan is also important. As we have seen, one of the largest requests is people looking for people, so a reunification plan is important, a place in your community where you will agree to meet your loved ones. Then, it is important to have an out-of-state contact, so that I can phone my aunt in New York and assure her that I'm OK, this is where I am. And then my mother can call New York to that same out-of-state contact. Even if we never talk to each other, we're connected, and we're one step ahead of the game.

Is all the training geared toward earthquakes? Or is the preparedness the same whether you're talking about earthquakes, floods or a terrorist attack? The preparation is similar. After the Sept. 11 attacks, people were saying, 'Why are you even

talking about earthquakes? We just want to know what to do in case of terrorism.' The preparation is the same, but the response may be different. If it's a terrorist attack, the response may be shelter-in-place or evacuation. If I were told to evacuate and I had my supply kit all ready, I'd be in much better position than if my supplies were all over my house. So that's why we recommend the kit.

Can you paint a picture of a disaster striking San Francisco and describe the difference between a city that is not prepared and one that is prepared? In our job as public safety first-responders, we would immediately be overwhelmed in a large-scale disaster. Our resources were overwhelmed in the 1989 earthquake, and that was not the Big One. So if there were an earthquake that had a lot greater damage and a lot greater area ... we have approximately 300 personnel on per day, and during peak business hours in San Francisco there are approximately 1.5 million people in The City. So once we were immediately overwhelmed, having teams of citizens that could reassure each other, that could waylay some of the panicked feelings that are going on among some of the people that are not trained, are obvious benefits. There was an article not too long ago about the looting and violence that happened after the 1906 earthquake, so some of that can be averted if people are taken care of, because while it is looting, on some level it's just people getting what they need.

What's the critical time period after any emergency? Hours, days, weeks? Days. Our idea that the first 72 hours were key because help would not arrive until then was proven wrong in the Gulf Coast region, where we saw people five and six days later still needing attention and not being responded to, I think five days is a much more realistic period. Help will arrive from outside the area, but we won't get help from San Mateo, from Oakland. They'll be dealing with the same level of emergency that we are here in San Francisco.

What should people have in a supply kit? The essentials are water, food that will not spoil, warm clothes, comfortable shoes, an AM radio with spare batteries, and a flashlight. That would be my bare minimum. You want to expand on that kit for your home needs. You want to have a mini-kit at your place of work, and a mini-kit for your car, because you just don't know where you'll be. The other thing that might happen is if you don't live in San Francisco but work here, you have to be prepared for someone to say to you, 'You're not going home today.' The bridges might be closed, you might become stuck. So you want to think about preparations for home, your work and your car.

Please visit www.sfgov.org/sffdner for more information on the NERT program.

"2005: Challenges & Opportunities" appears Fridays in The Examiner.

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