

Bushra: [00:07](#) Hello everyone. Welcome to Prep Talk, the emergency anagement podcast. Find out what you need to know about preparedness. Get all the latest tips from experts in the field and learn what to do before the next disaster strikes. From the Emergency Management Department in The City That Never Sleeps, here are your hosts, Omar Bourne and Allison Pennisi.

Omar Bourne: [00:25](#) Hello, everyone. Thank you for listening. I'm Omar Bourne.

Allison Pennisi: [00:28](#) And I'm Allison Pennisi. Thank you for joining us. We want you to come back as often as you can, so feel free to add Prep Talk to your favorite RSS feed. You can also follow us on social media.

Omar Bourne: [00:39](#) Now, Allison, this is a special episode. We are celebrating an anniversary and it's 15 years, Allison. 15 years. Can you believe it?

Allison Pennisi: [00:47](#) I can't believe it, Omar, but you know what they say, time flies when you're having fun. For everyone listening, this marks the 15th anniversary of the Community Emergency Response Team, or CERT Program here in New York City.

Omar Bourne: [00:59](#) Here to talk to us are individuals who play key roles in training and working with our CERT volunteers. Please welcome Christina Farrell, Deputy Commissioner for External Affairs here at New York City Emergency Management. We also have Deputy Chief Jim Brosi with the FDNY, the fire department, and Inspector Phyllis Byrne. She is the commanding officer at NYPD Auxiliary. Thank you all for being here today.

Allison Pennisi: [01:23](#) So, Christina, let's start with you. You've been involved with the City's CERT program since the beginning. What was the impetus behind getting CERT started here in NYC?

Christina F.: [01:33](#) Great. You know I'm always happy to talk about CERT.

Omar Bourne: [01:35](#) That's right.

Christina Farr: [01:36](#) So CERT came to New York, as we said, in 2003. It became a national program after 9/11. It started out in the West Coast, in the 80s. Some of the first responders there needed assistance fighting wildfires, and there was a large earthquake. But after 9/11, I think in the city and as emergency management grew, we started to look at the volunteer programs. There was Auxiliary, there was some other programs across the city. But we thought that there was room for CERT. And there was a way

to get people involved in preparedness and in other types of emergencies. So we started out with some training, a few teams and then, like you said, it's grown over the last 15 years.

- Omar Bourne: [02:18](#) I know FDNY and the NYPD play an important part in training our volunteers. Chief Brosi, I'm going to start with you of the FDNY. What type of training is available for our volunteers?
- Jim Brosi: [02:30](#) From the fire department's side, we try to train them in high-rise urban ... High-rise building safety. We train them in light search and rescue, transportation safety, and how to extinguish small fires so that they be prepared for a variety of things that may either happen in a home or at a large-scale disaster.
- Omar Bourne: [02:49](#) Inspector Byrne, how about you?
- Phyllis Byrne: [02:50](#) So we train them in basic traffic management which is very important, obviously, during emergencies. And we also train them with moving pedestrians around, crowd control. Helping us direct people during an emergency.
- Allison Pennisi: [03:05](#) Now CERT started with just a little over 100 members. Now, there are more than 1,200 active credentialed volunteers representing about 50 teams throughout New York City. Can each of you speak to the evolution of the program that has allowed for this increase in membership? Inspector Byrne, let's begin with you.
- Phyllis Byrne: [03:24](#) And you're talking about how we've increased the program?
- Allison Pennisi: [03:27](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Phyllis Byrne: [03:28](#) And how we've recruited for the program.
- Allison Pennisi: [03:30](#) Yes, absolutely.
- Phyllis Byrne: [03:31](#) Yeah, so as Christina said, there's a tremendous need for assistance with emergency response. We have over eight and a half million people in New York City and clearly no agency can do it all. Even though we are the largest police department in the country, we need help. We need eyes and ears other places. CERT members fill that gap. They help us out with that. We encourage our members to recruit their friends and also family members that might be interested in it. And we do see a lot of people joining the program, and it's becoming much like the Auxiliary program, a family legacy, where we see parents, and sons, daughters, couples, coming in and joining together.

Allison Pennisi: [04:18](#) Chief Brosi?

Jim Brosi: [04:19](#) I think in addition to those things that the inspector had mentioned is, some of the recent disasters such as Hurricane Sandy, and things along those lines have proven to people that they need to know more, and that in order to fill that gap that the inspector had spoke about, that has to come from the community. I think people, in an effort to seek out that type of information so that they can be somewhat self-sufficient in the early stages of a disaster, they've sought out this program. As this program has evolved from its first early classes 15 years ago, it has morphed more into an urban CERT to meet the needs of people who live in a more urban area, and I think we've created some really self-sufficient people, and people who are able to spread a message and actually let that grow in their own community.

Allison Pennisi: [05:08](#) Christina?

Christina F.: [05:09](#) I agree with all of that, obviously. I would say that in addition to helping with different emergencies like hurricane Sandy, some of the building explosions we've had, the CERT members were active after working with the Hurricane Maria service center that the City had up for several months last year. Many of them are bilingual, in a host of languages which is terrific for us. But they also help a lot with preparedness. They do events in their own community. They get involved lots of different ways. I think that the word emergency is a guideline for the group.

Christina F.: [05:47](#) I know Chief Brosi likes to say, "If a team can't organize itself to assist with the marathon, or to assist with a local parade, how are they going to be organized to work on big emergencies?" I think one of the keys to the program is that we're able to keep them busy. We keep them busy with emergencies. We keep them busy with Ready New York and other presentations, but then they also find a lot of things in their community. A lot of ways to be involved to get the word of preparedness out and to really be good neighbors.

Omar Bourne: [06:15](#) And it's great that they fill those gaps whether it's in emergencies or before in helping to prepare their communities. And that's what it's really about. It's about being a community and during emergencies especially, whether it's extreme heat, winter weather, our officials, we emphasize being a good neighbor. Check in on the elderly, other vulnerable populations. Can you talk to us about the importance of helping others in need and what the CERT program brings there?

- Jim Brosi: [06:47](#) I think that's more or less the basis for the program. The difference from us from I'd say a lot of the other volunteer programs is ours is mostly community centered in that we want you to seek out the people who have needs before a disaster strikes. We want you to make connections with them in the community so that when something does happen, these people are not only identified, but we can figure out what they actually do need. Some of that is morphed into some more generic things like snow measurement or clearing out hydrants that inadvertently have some rippling effect to the community, but I think most people enter the program thinking it's a community-based program but at the end realize that in order to be effective, they need to get in touch with all of the people in their neighborhood, and try to figure out who they can be most helpful to, who can't help themselves.
- Christina F.: [07:33](#) Definitely. And I think another thing we've seen of the years is that these people are very busy before they join CERT and they just carve out more time in an already very busy life for this. They may be Auxiliaries, they may be involved with their house of worship, through schools, on their community board, so they already have a lot of those networks. But as we see, communities change over time. There are new members in the community that need to be involved, and so they bring a lot of those networks to us and to the program which is fantastic. And when you go to a graduation, or when you're at a class, you can see the diversity, you can see difference in ages, in backgrounds, all of that, which is really indicative of the city, and really what we need for this program to be successful and for all communities to be represented.
- Phyllis Byrne: [08:25](#) Yeah, I'd like to just add to what Christina just said which I think is so true, and CERT really shows people this. That we're really all connected, and this program is a great example of that. It allows people from different backgrounds to get together. Maybe they never would've met, never would've connected, but CERT allows them to see that. As Jim said, before an emergency happens, these relationships have now developed and we have a much better outcome and I do think that public safety and caring about each other, it's a shared responsibility. It's not just, again, an agency, fire department, police department, or EMS that comes in. It's really people taking responsibility for themselves and other people. Again, CERT is a great way for people to do that and to really fulfill that need. I think we all have the need to feel connected, and it's a really positive way that New York City can connect with each other. The people of New York City.

- Omar Bourne: [09:32](#) What is so great about your point, we had a couple of CERT members on a previous show, Allison, and they really talked about, they didn't know each beforehand but coming into CERT, they're now family. They look out for each other, they call each other from time to time, they have barbecues, they attend family events. It's really turned out to be a family affair in the CERT program and that's what it's about.
- Allison Pennisi: [09:58](#) Community is not only being a good neighbor but also supporting the efforts of first responders which we know that our CERT volunteers are given the capability to do and acquire different skills. Inspector Byrne, you had talked about traffic management in particular which I think is a great skill that people acquire because you don't realize how much actually goes into it. Can you share in incident when NYPD may have called upon CERT to assist with an emergency or maybe a planned event here in the city?
- Phyllis Byrne: [10:26](#) Sure. Actually, specifically, a traffic management incident that I witnessed was during Hurricane Sandy on Staten Island. I was out on Staten Island right after the hurricane passed, and obviously it was devastated. There was no power. There was no traffic lights. I actually got to see my CERT members and my Auxiliary officers standing side-by-side directing traffic all around Staten Island, particularly on Hylan Boulevard. It was amazing to see. They did a fantastic job, and you're right, it's not that easy to do. It's actually a skill. And they were out there working together and really helping to keep people who had already been devastated by the hurricane, safe. I was really impressed with that, and I really got to see the importance of what CERT does. What CERT members do.
- Allison Pennisi: [11:23](#) Now Chief Brosi, can you give us an example of when CERT volunteers may have helped, either after a fire or maybe another large scale event?
- Jim Brosi: [11:31](#) Although they've done countless things, the one thing that sticks out to me the most is I was assigned to the Second Avenue gas explosion for an extended period of time. In the early stages of the fire, there was no room for CERT volunteers initially other than in a reception center to maybe help some of the people who were displaced. But as the incident progressed, many of the residents in the adjoining structures that were structurally sound, but on inhabitable, wanted to get back in and retrieve a lot of their personal belongings. Traditionally, that can only be done by a police officer accompanying them

into each apartment and waiting with each individual to gather their stuff.

- Jim Brosi: [12:09](#) I don't know who come up with the idea but someone offered that CERT volunteers would work with one police officer in front of the building and then once the occupant was verified, they would go up and give them a far greater amount of time because it wasn't depleting resources and a far more personal experience by allowing them to be with someone who was more or less a neighbor to allow them to gather their things, really assess the degree of damage and kind of where they were going to go from here. It was probably one of the most effective and most personalized actions I've seen CERT taken and I got to see it over a couple of days, and it meant a lot to the people that were able to get back into those buildings.
- Omar Bourne: [12:48](#) CERT volunteers can play an important role in assisting their communities during emergencies, but what about in non-emergencies? We call it Blue Sky Times. Christina, I know you touched on this a little earlier, so how can CERT volunteers help out when they're not involved in emergencies?
- Christina F.: [13:06](#) I think the main way they work with us is to help prepare their neighbors in their communities. As you know, Emergency Management runs the Ready New York program where we go out about 900 times a year across the city and CERT is an integral part of that. They're out several times a week at our request, and I know that they organize many presentations on themselves because we're continually packing up Ready New York boxes in a multitude of languages and different guides to send out to them, which is terrific because people, they're actually practicing what they preach. They are some of the most prepared people in the city because they take it very seriously.
- Christina F.: [13:45](#) I think, a lot of times, it's helpful for people to hear it from their neighbors, from the community. Many CERT members may have been through an emergency in their own life whether through Hurricane Sandy or through a fire or a subway derailment or other extended power outage, so they've really learned or they've seen the effect of emergencies. Having them there, speaking about their own experiences and giving first hand advice, I think is really helpful to impress upon their neighbor why this important to become prepared.
- Omar Bourne: [14:19](#) And I know Emergency Management have also worked with the CERT volunteers for our Know Your Zone campaign, and they've talked about how they've been empowered through the CERT

program and through working with Emergency Management to be prepared for emergencies, specifically coastal storms.

Allison Pennisi: [14:38](#)

They're advocates in their community, they support our first responders, we're very happy to have them, but I also am very curious, this question is for the three of you, where do you see the CERT program in the next few years? We've seen it evolve pretty extensively. More volunteers, more skills that are being acquired by these volunteers. Inspector Byrne, let's start with you.

Phyllis Byrne: [15:00](#)

It's something I said earlier. I really do see it growing, expanding, becoming just basically a given with members of the community and something that I've seen in the Auxiliary program, which is also volunteer. Becoming a family legacy because I do see a lot of parents who are involved in this, teaching their children, bringing them around about emergency preparedness and teaching them that civic responsibility is a good thing. That with have a shared responsibility for public safety. And I love seeing that. I think all of these programs, meaning the Auxiliary program and CERT, are really a way to do that because again, we have a huge population in New York City. We all know we can't do it alone. We work best when the community is working with us, and we're working with them so this is a great way to do it.

Jim Brosi: [15:59](#)

I agree. I think the growth in numbers from other CERT members by bringing in family members and friends is probably one of the best ways to grow the program. The other thing is I think most volunteers want to work and I think that we've done a much better job from our inception to where we were in emergency or crisis-based group that would only come for these large scale disasters. And now, we've found work for CERT teams. We've found work for people with individual talents like speaking a specific language. We've had all hands responses for people who weren't affected by Sandy and even though their team couldn't be activated, we were able to find some way that they could eject themselves into the situation and provide any assistance they could. I just think that keeping our people and keeping them involved it really defines the program, and it actually gives them the reward that they're looking for after their training.

Christina F.: [16:52](#)

One thing that is growing and I think will continue is CERT teams and CERT members functioning within their burrows. You had mentioned Staten Island and the work out there. We have borough coordinators. They're veteran volunteers who have run

a CERT team and who are ready to really step into a higher leadership role, and they're invaluable to us as we ... there's a lot of administration to manage 1,200 volunteers and make sure that everything runs as smoothly as it can, and having boroughs ... because the boroughs are still very large, and if you have ...

- Christina F.: [17:29](#) Say in Queens, you have people in Astoria, people in Rockaway, people in Douglaston, and they can all come together and help if there's an issue in Forest Hills or if there's an issue in Flushing. It's not convenient to run everything out of Brooklyn. Things need to be in the different burrows. People don't always want to travel, understandably, all the way to Cadman Plaza for training or for things. So being able to offer more within the burrows and having people work together on that level, I think is helpful for other volunteers and it's certainly helpful for the city.
- Omar Bourne: [18:01](#) Now this is going to be the CERT elevator pitch, and I've heard all of you speak at CERT graduations to the graduates. What would you say to people who may be considering joining the CERT program? Chief Brosi, I'll start with you.
- Jim Brosi: [18:17](#) I would say, come. I would say that I think that knowledge continues to be power and when people are in a crisis situation, either they have a plan based on some real knowledge, or they panic. We only really need a handful of knowledgeable people in a situation to direct large numbers of people to make safe choices. That could be on a subway, that could be in a high-rise building, that could be at a small trashcan fire, or that could be a large-scale disaster. This information, although it's oftentimes just dedicated to one or two family members, it makes it back to everyone in your household and everyone in your community. Although we wish that every one of them would become active CERT members in the longterm and be vibrant of a team.
- Jim Brosi: [19:03](#) But I will tell you, there's some great value in just getting the information and there's some great value in getting it from what we call the tactical experts. People that are in the field. And there's some great value in connecting with the police department, the fire department, and EMS, and getting to know these people and what they do and how they function. Because whether it's a response or whether you're acting on the street, the things you do in the earliest stages of an incident have a direct impact on everything we do thereafter. I'm not sure that you could get this information from three different agencies in any other program, condensed into five or six weeks, and an

ability to do some post-training and put some of these things into application in any other group.

- Omar Bourne: [19:42](#) As you said, knowledge is power and as we like to say, Allison, during an emergency, winging it is not an option.
- Allison Pennisi: [19:47](#) Not an emergency plan.
- Omar Bourne: [19:48](#) There you go. It's not an option.
- Allison Pennisi: [19:48](#) Not an emergency plan.
- Omar Bourne: [19:52](#) Inspector Byrne.
- Phyllis Byrne: [19:52](#) So, what I would say, a good reason to join is you would be surprised how much you get out of volunteering. I'm going to steal this from someone else that spoke at a graduation. I believe it was Paula Gavin. Volunteers are, it's known, it's proven, that volunteers are happier, have lower levels of depression, live more fulfilled lives, have less medical problems, just from volunteering. So really, give it a chance because you would be surprised how much you actually would get out of volunteering. Everybody wants to know, well, what's in it for me? Besides the knowledge that Chief Brosi talked about, you're really going to find, and if you speak to any of the volunteers, they'll tell you, a fulfillment they can't get any other way. Give it a shot. You have nothing to lose.
- Allison Pennisi: [20:45](#) Good for you. Good for the city.
- Omar Bourne: [20:47](#) There you go. Christina?
- Christina F.: [20:49](#) I would just say that as we've all said, your city needs you. We have eight and a half million people. We have lots of first responders but as both these experts have said, they're incredibly busy when an emergency happens. All the work gets done but there's a way to involve knowledgeable volunteers, organized volunteers and to make the experience a little less traumatic for those that are involved. I think it's just a great opportunity for people and we welcome everyone to come, to train, and to get to know us.
- Omar Bourne: [21:25](#) Great opportunity. Knowledge is power. It's good for you. It's good for the city. I love it. All of our listeners, if you are not a member of CERT, get involved. You're not going to regret it. We're going to move into our rapid fire Q&A and we started this last episode.

Allison Pennisi: [21:43](#) Yes.

Omar Bourne: [21:44](#) So we're going to ask you guys a few questions, and just give us your most genuine responses possible. Quick, fun, easy.

Omar Bourne: [21:56](#) The first question, I'm going to start with Christina. What is your fondest CERT experience?

Christina F.: [22:02](#) I think I may have said this a few minutes ago, but I really love the graduations. We have two or three a year. It's here at Emergency Management in our EOC. Seeing the families, seeing the graduates, their interactions with the police and fire officials that they've trained with and seeing how excited the team chiefs are to have them. You can't walk away with that not feeling proud and being excited for the future of the program.

Omar Bourne: [22:28](#) Wonderful. Chief Brosi, how about you?

Jim Brosi: [22:31](#) I'm particularly fond of the drills at Randall's Island even though they only happen either annually or semi-annually. It is the only time we get together with all four, OEM, fire department, police department, and EMS all in one place. Normally we only teach as individuals and we get to see the CERT members operate not as teams but as individuals and have to find their way with working with strangers more or less and figuring out to come up with a plan. We get to see how our other instructors interact with the students, kind of pick up off of each other. I think overall, it's a really, really good experience for us and for them.

Omar Bourne: [23:05](#) Wonderful. Inspector Byrne, how about you? Fondest CERT experience.

Phyllis Byrne: [23:09](#) My fondest CERT experience actually happened at a CERT graduation when one of our Bronx CERT members who was receiving an award, Wally, said, genuinely, that he loved the program and he said, "I never would've made these connections." He goes, "Let's be honest. I wouldn't be hanging out with cops and firemen if I wasn't in this program." And it was so genuine but so true.

Omar Bourne: [23:34](#) Right. Wonderful.

Allison Pennisi: [23:35](#) Love it. Okay. Next question. What do you think is the most important emergency preparedness tip? I know we talked about getting involved, joining the CERT program, but inspector Byrne, let's start with you.

Phyllis Byrne: [23:48](#) To me, the most important one I've learned is set up a meeting point with your family and friends. Some place away from your residence or if there's an emergency, some place else. Where are you going to meet?

Allison Pennisi: [24:00](#) Chief Brosi?

Jim Brosi: [24:02](#) Although we stress this quite a bit throughout the cycle is to be prepared yourself. Very difficult to help anyone else if you're not prepared and if you're not settled. If you want to be an effective helper, be prepared yourself.

Allison Pennisi: [24:14](#) Christina?

Christina F.: [24:15](#) I would say be informed. Just like the Chief said, if you don't know what's going on, how are you going to put yourself out there to help other people? We have Notify NYC, you can follow it on Twitter. There's an app. You can get phone calls on your landline. Being informed, knowing what's going on in the city is going to help you to be prepared.

Omar Bourne: [24:34](#) For those who have landlines, we can still get you on your landline. Two more questions. Christina, I'm going to come back to you with this one. What is one emergency item you cannot live without?

Christina F.: [24:46](#) I'm going to say water because that is something you need to stay hydrated. You need to stay healthy.

Omar Bourne: [24:54](#) I like it. Chief Brosi?

Jim Brosi: [24:54](#) I usually try to carry a small tool with me. I have one on my key chain now. A mini Leatherman. Just in case you need something.

Omar Bourne: [25:02](#) I like it. Inspector Byrne?

Phyllis Byrne: [25:05](#) My answer would be water, for sure, but my real answer would be my dog, don't tell my husband.

Allison Pennisi: [25:17](#) That's fantastic. Okay, I know we sort of touched upon this a little bit earlier but I would like to get a one word answer about this. The future of CERT. Inspector Byrne.

Phyllis Byrne: [25:28](#) Expanding.

Allison Pennisi: [25:29](#) Chief Brosi?

Jim Brosi: [25:30](#) Evolving.

Allison Pennisi: [25:31](#) Christina?

Christina F.: [25:32](#) Busy.

Allison Pennisi: [25:33](#) Yes, always busy. It's New York.

Omar Bourne: [25:35](#) There you go. I think we got time for one more. More on the lighter side here, what is your disaster-themed movie or TV show? Inspector Byrne, I'm going to start with you.

Phyllis Byrne: [25:47](#) All right. I'm going to go with a little known one probably, I don't know who would know it. Deep Impact with Téa Leoni.

Allison Pennisi: [25:54](#) Yes, I have seen it. It's really good.

Phyllis Byrne: [25:56](#) About a comet hitting the earth.

Omar Bourne: [25:59](#) Chief Brosi?

Jim Brosi: [26:00](#) Although it didn't make a lot of money, but Waterworld with Kevin Costner only because I liked the ingenuity that people were able to make things out of more or less garbage in order to survive.

Omar Bourne: [26:10](#) I like it. Christina.

Christina F.: [26:11](#) I don't really know if it's disaster-themed but I love the TV show Survivor. I like the team aspect until they all turn on each other. And I like people battling the elements because hazards are something that we talk about a lot. And then there's always a lot of puzzles on the show, and I like all the puzzles.

Omar Bourne: [26:30](#) Wonderful.

Allison Pennisi: [26:31](#) Always a challenge, but we love it. For those interested in getting involved with the CERT program, don't forget, please sign up. We would love to have you. As we said before, public safety is a shared responsibility. You can visit nyc.gov/cert or call 311 for more information.

Allison Pennisi: [26:50](#) That's this edition of Prep Talk. If you like what you heard, you can listen anytime online or through your favorite RSS feed. Until next time. Stay safe, and prepared.