

TITLE OF THIS ENTRY) Providing for Basic Needs During COVID-19

OVERVIEW:

San Diego County Fire's Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) brought together volunteers to provide over 130,000 San Diegans with food, testing and other basics during COVID-19.

CHALLENGE:

After learning that local food banks faced dire volunteer shortages in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, San Diego County Fire (County Fire) quickly activated its Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program. Historically, the program had mobilized numerous times in response to wildfires, but never for a public health emergency. Though many CERT volunteers fell into risk categories of being 65 years or older or having pre-existing conditions, County Fire's CERT program did not hesitate, instead adapting to meet the urgent need. CERT deployed only those volunteers outside the risk categories, and volunteers closely adhered to infection control measures.

SOLUTION:

County Fire's CERT program knew it could achieve much more by teaming up with its CERT counterparts from across the region. Within weeks, County Fire's CERT brought together fellow CERT volunteers from 20 of the region's 24 active programs under a mutual aid plan established in 2012 but never used. In fact, some local CERT programs had never activated. The CERT network sprang to life, crossing jurisdictional boundaries that would have otherwise prevented many eligible volunteers from assisting. At large-scale food distribution events, CERT program members from various programs joined to work as a single team. In some cases, volunteers from up to six CERT programs worked together. County Fire's CERT coordinated the efforts, tracked volunteer hours and tasks performed, and reported weekly to Cal OES on behalf of 20 participating CERT programs.

INNOVATION:

County Fire's CERT program, and other local CERT programs, are among the few across the state and nation to deploy in response to COVID-19. The response shows flexibility, innovation, and a deep commitment to serving neighbors in times of need. These efforts were featured in California Governor's

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Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) reports to Gov. Newsom and recognized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

RESULTS:

Since activating March 20, 2020, local CERT volunteers have donated over 4,000 hours of service, worth an estimated \$124,093. CERT teams reached 114,063 people through large-scale food distribution events for the nonprofits Feeding San Diego, San Diego Food Bank, San Diego LGBT Community Center, and Courage to Call. CERT volunteers took shifts in warehouses and food pantries and worked at County Fire/CAL FIRE COVID-19 testing sites in local rural communities. County Fire CERT volunteers supported thousands of additional residents by making cloth masks, delivering food, and connecting with homebound seniors by phone. A Feeding San Diego manager thanked County Fire's CERT on July 6, 2020:

“I want to thank you again and everyone at CERT for their awesome support over the past three and a half months. Since March, CERT volunteers have donated 1,023 hours and helped pack more than 70,000 emergency food boxes for 10 elementary and high schools across the San Diego Unified School District. We could not do what we do for families facing hunger during the COVID-19 pandemic without CERT's support.”

REPLICABILITY:

This program can be widely replicated in California. Local CERT leaders meet regularly as part of a CERT Council, discussing best practices and supporting one another. These close working relationships led to the mutual aid and COVID-19 collaboration. Counties can start by forming similar CERT councils and strengthening these CERT networks. The mutual aid agreement is like those used by fire agencies. County Fire is happy to assist its counterparts.

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