

Daily Southtown Article about Alsip CERT

Residents recruited to be emergency responders as part of new team in Alsip

Author Dennis Sullivan

Originally Published: October 3, 2018 at 6:20 PM CDT

UPDATED: May 22, 2019 at 4:13 AM CDT

I'd always been interested in learning some medical techniques," recalled Alsip resident John Gray, an oil-tanker driver who's seen his share of road-related mishaps but had lacked the training to help.

Gray is among more-than two-dozen village and area residents who have learned what to do when facing physical injuries, emotional trauma, crowd events and even post-disaster damage thanks to a free Alsip program sponsored and promoted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"I learned techniques I can apply — and what not to do," said Gray, adding the Community Emergency Response Team course work was "challenging but not overwhelming."

Part-time village and Park District employee Laura Braden also was drawn to the training by a desire for more medical knowledge. But she was also impressed with the CERT program's practical applications, such as fire-suppression training.

"We learned how to use a fire extinguisher and what it's like to be in a fire," Braden said. "It's hot and it's dangerous!"

Gray, Braden and 25 other students became the village's first CERT team after applying their training to a simulated disaster scenario, a sort of hands-on final exam requiring patience, steady nerves, empathy and awareness of their surroundings. CERT members continue training with monthly sessions "to keep you on your toes," Gray said

Charles "Chuck" Geraci, Alsip's emergency preparedness director, started the program with support from New Lenox and other nearby communities with exiting CERT programs.

Alsip Village President John Ryan credited Geraci with "doing a very good job" in using his part-time role to create a new resource for the village.

"I was very impressed, but not just with what Chuck did, but — more importantly — with the support we got from other communities with CERT certification," he said.

Ryan said citizen volunteer programs like CERT and the community-policing academy give residents "more of a vested interest in their community."

Ryan, a former trustee in his second year as mayor, said the CERT program has also helped him to understand "my responsibilities at the time of an emergency."

Budget constraints also make it essential to enlist citizen talents whenever possible, Ryan

said, noting CERT can potentially free police, fire and paramedics to address the most serious issues during emergencies, accidents and special events.

Alsip crime prevention Officer Rocco Merlo agreed, saying CERT members' recent oversight of pedestrian safety crossings during the National Night Out program "really worked out well and freed up police personnel who otherwise would be tied up at the crossing."

Merlo predicted CERT members would become an increasing presence "as time goes on and different opportunities arise."

Geraci, who retired as Alsip fire chief in 2012, credited long-time emergency-preparedness head Frank Hiter with laying the groundwork for the village's readiness efforts.

Gray and Braden will join Geraci in talking about the program Saturday during the fire department's open house at Firehouse No. 2, 11946 Laramie Ave.

An Alsip resident tends to a simulated victim during a training exercise as the village forms its initial Community Emergency Response Team. More than two dozen residents underwent training to form the group.