



Community Emergency Response Network Howard County, Maryland

Summary: Any disaster situation in the Washington D.C., or Baltimore, Md., could potentially affect residents in neighboring Howard County. That's why the county and its community-based organizations decided to launch a major emergency preparedness effort that would involve as many citizens and sectors of the community as possible.

WASHINGTON – May 21, 2003 -- The September 11 attacks were a wake-up call for Howard County, Md. Located about 25 miles from Washington, D.C., and 20 miles from Baltimore, MD, Howard County knows its residents and infrastructure could be affected by a terrorist incident in Washington, D.C., or Baltimore. The Community Emergency Response Network (CERN) was formed to create a network for emergency preparedness that involves both citizens and organizations and is functionally integrated with the county's Emergency Operations Center.

"We now know that as United States citizens, we need to be prepared in the event of a terrorist attack, no matter where we live," said Richard Krieg, CERN chairman and president of The Horizon Foundation, a community-oriented organization based in Howard County. "The missing link has been to mobilize organizations as a way to maximize overall community resilience." CERN is composed of front-line responders and representatives of the nonprofit community, major homeowner associations, the hospital system, the public schools and others. The group encourages community-wide disaster response planning that includes planning for terrorist incidents. It also encourages organizations without such plans to develop them.

Early this year, CERN and the Howard County Public School System conducted a table-top exercise that provided participants with a realistic experience dealing with a large-scale terrorist event that occurred nearby, but not directly in Howard County. The exercise also provided an opportunity to evaluate the schools' emergency plans and organizational structures. Lessons learned: survivable radio communications are needed to supplement cell and landline telephones, decision-making should be decentralized in emergencies to allow maximum flexibility at the school level, and schools need to work with parents to identify individuals to whom their children may be released in the event of an emergency.

More recently, the group organized a table-top exercise for Howard County Community College, walking participants through a scenario involving a nuclear bomb explosion at Baltimore-Washington International Airport. Lessons learned: the college needs to address liability issues, establish procedures to isolate and assist people arriving from contaminated areas, and ensure that safe areas have enough supplies for sheltering-in-place.

CERN's Web site, located at www.cern.us, is updated frequently with emergency preparedness information and includes links to all-news radio stations as well as local television stations in Washington and Baltimore. It also includes information about family emergency plans and disaster supply kits. The group is now working on a system of public shelters for emergencies and additional simulated disasters for county organizations. CERN was recently designated Howard County's Citizen Corps Council. Citizen Corps, a component of USA Freedom Corps, creates opportunities for individuals to help their communities prepare for disasters and emergencies of all kinds.

Smart Practices Spotlight highlights practices and ideas that members of the emergency management and responder community have found useful and effective; they are not necessarily advocated or endorsed by FEMA. For more information about this initiative, contact Dr. Richard Krieg of The Horizon Foundation at 410-715-0311 or rkrieg@thehorizonfoundation.org