

Mart High School's Teen CERT Plays a Large Role in a Small Community

Mart, TX—a town of about 2,200 people—doesn't have its own emergency medical services (EMS) department. This means many residents who need emergency medical response have to wait 20-30 minutes for an ambulance, leaving a critical response gap for the town—one that local high school students have stepped up to fill.

Since 2012, students at Mart High School have had the opportunity to participate on a Teen Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), after Elizabeth Buffy Waldie, EMT-B, CERT Instructor and Foreign Language Chair, Mart High School,

was approached by the Career and Technical Education Instructor about grant funding for the program. She set out to recruit the best of the best at the school of 150 students, and the program has continued to grow each year as more and more students have gotten involved. Now, nearly 25 percent of Mart High School students have been certified in disaster preparedness and advanced medical training, working with medical professionals, and training as if they were in Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) School.

Recruiting Committed Students

After bringing the idea to Mart High School, Waldie recruited students at the start of the school year as they signed up for classes, talking with prospective students about the course, what they would be doing, and what her expectations were. She also secured support from the school principal and administration, which has helped contribute to the success of the program.

“We ended up with a class full of people, and when the other students saw what we got to do, that itself is advertising; and every year it keeps getting bigger and bigger,” she said. “This year, the students wear their CERT uniforms once a week, so it's free advertising.”

Recruiting students that are passionate about helping their community is another consideration for joining the Teen CERT. Students must be either a sophomore, junior, or senior, and Waldie considers attendance, grades, discipline, and evaluations from teachers. As the Teen CERT has been built into the city's emergency management plan, Waldie says it's important to take these factors into account to make sure they can handle the commitment that comes with CERT, which she considers to be similar to a part time job, on top of their other classes. The next step is having the students and parents sign a contract.



Mart High School Teen CERT members provide treatment.



Mart High School students in Teen CERT training

“When they get into the class, the very first thing they do is sign a contract saying what they can and cannot do—for instance, I tell them ‘you are not a firefighter, you cannot go into a burning building. You are not EMS, you cannot show up to a random EMS call,’” Waldie said. “They sign the contract, their parents sign it, they get a copy, and I get a copy. We’ve never had anybody do something they aren’t supposed to.”

Learning the Essentials

Trainings are an integral part of participating in

the Teen CERT program. Students learn skills in such areas as airway management, ventilations,

cardiac emergencies, CPR, taking blood pressures, anaphylaxis, neurological emergencies, diabetic emergencies, altered mental status, seizures, and heat and cold, among also training with local firefighters. Students also have access to a variety of resources.

“We have everything a basic ambulance would have, with the exception of oxygen, aspirin, and a nebulizer, because those would be considered medication,” Waldie said. “Everything else they have, and we have a ton of it—collars, splints, stretchers. If something happens, we just grab our bags and go.”

Students get to put these skills and resources into practice during real emergencies by going on “ride outs” with EMS from Limestone Medical Center nearly 20 miles away. To participate in ride outs, students, and their families meet with the EMS supervisor to discuss expectations and scheduling, and then can sign up for shifts that work within their schedules. Once the paperwork is complete, they can ride out anytime they want. Some students choose to go above and beyond—staying late into the night or volunteering throughout the summer months.

“They get to the EMS center at 8 o’clock when the shifts are going on, check in trucks and wait for when they are called. They do all of the things that the EMT tells them to do,” Waldie added. “Depending on who they work with depends on how much they get to do. Last year, we had kids that had to do CPR because while working in the ER, the police chief was hit by a semi-truck while directing traffic. One of our CERT students got to work on him.”

Nine of the 15 Teen CERT students participate in EMS ride outs, while two students attend Emergency Medical Technician school in addition to high school. Waldie is also looking for new opportunities to do more with the volunteer fire department in Waco County, to give her students some other new experiences. When students graduate—nine of which will at the end of the 2017 school year—Waldie always looks for a way to keep them involved, whether through coming back to visit the school or asking them to instruct classes for newer Teen CERT members.

The Role of Teen CERT in the Community

The Mart High School Teen CERT plays a big role in the city, and the members of the community have been extremely receptive and grateful for their presence at city-wide events. For instance, the students

are asked to come to events such as the National Night Out because so many members of the community attend. This way, if anything happens, or children get injured while playing, the Teen CERT is there to provide medical care—something that parents really appreciate.

“One year, during PrepareAthon, we were passing out flyers at the grocery store and there was a massive car accident right in front of us,” Waldie said. “My students were the first ones there, and got to provide medical assistance before the fire department and ambulance showed up.”

The students also have a strong presence within their school. While the school nurse was out for a few months, the CERT students would handle injuries or medical emergencies—taking vitals for students and staff and evaluating the school’s safety. And, they also have the support of Waldie, although she mentions it’s not always needed.

“At school, we had some kids playing around, and one student cut her head open. Before they could come get me, one of my CERT students had it handled—he had her vital signs, checked her bleeding status, and got on the phone to have her parents come get her because she was going to need stitches. I didn’t have to do anything,” Waldie said.

Responding to the Marlin Water Crisis

When Marlin, TX, faced a drought that left its residents without water for weeks, the Mart High School Teen CERT came to the rescue when they were called to help. Having been asked by the government to assist with the response, the students traveled to Marlin to talk to citizens, pass out water, and make sure they had everything they needed. They spent about 126 hours in the community during the water crisis, working with a variety of frustrated, angry, upset, and grateful citizens.

“I think because of their age, they impressed a lot of the people there,” said Bill Bischof, FEMA’s Community Preparedness Officer for Region VI. “This was during school, so they’re also still responsible for everything going on here. I think on top of 126 hours in Marlin, we all had to come back and get caught up, and they managed to get it all done and do it really gracefully. I was pretty impressed with them, and it also made us the first Teen CERT team deployed outside their coverage area.”

Bringing Youth Preparedness to the National Stage

The Mart High School Teen CERT has been well known within its community and regionally, but has recently received attention at the national level as well. Chandler Villa, one of Waldie’s students, was selected to be a member of the [FEMA’s National Youth Preparedness Council](#) for the 2016-2017 year, which brings together youth leaders from across the country who are highly interested and engaged in advocating youth preparedness and making a difference in their communities. She also serves on the FEMA Region VI Youth Preparedness Council.

“What starts with Buffy, her school, her students, and the community serves as a great example of something that works its way through the state, region, and ultimately, nationally,” Bischof said.

Waldie herself is regarded as an expert at the state, regional, and national levels in youth preparedness. She teaches a Teen CERT camp for the entire state, and the Heart of Texas Council of Government invited her to a youth preparedness board where she joined subject matter experts from the region to share what she and her students have done in Mart.

The Mart Teen CERT program was also recognized with a [2016 FEMA Individual and Community Preparedness Award for Outstanding Achievement in Youth Preparedness](#) at a ceremony at The White House in Washington, DC. At the ceremony, Waldie had the opportunity to share her experiences, success stories, and lessons learned with fellow emergency management and youth preparedness leaders. The students, especially the ones from the year before who really led the way for the program, were also thrilled about being recognized for their efforts on the national stage.

“Buffy and our Teen CERT, they’re integral in the community. They’re doing great things, they’re doing great work within the school district, the city, and the greater area around them to serve in any place they’re needed. That’s truly a wonderful thing, and we see that as an example we want to share anywhere and everywhere in our region, and then with other regions and with our headquarters. And we see that when Buffy was able to get the award and share her feedback with some partners at the HQ level,” Bischof added.

For more information about Mart High School’s Teen CERT program, please visit its [website](#).