

San Francisco Disaster Corps Brings Advanced Volunteer Training to Bear

This year's World Series may have erupted in earth-shattering joy for long-suffering Chicago Cubs fans, but in 1989 the earth literally shattered the World Series.

You might remember watching live on television as the broadcast began shaking. The Loma Prieta earthquake that struck San Francisco highlighted the importance of emergency preparedness. Since then, the San Francisco Neighborhood Emergency Response Team (NERT) program has trained roughly 1,000 residents a year for a total of about 27,000 people. The NERT program has been so successful that it now has a subset of volunteers called the San Francisco Disaster Corps.

"My favorite part of the program," said Lt. Erica Arteseros, NERT Program Coordinator for the San Francisco Fire Department, "is how our volunteers have the opportunity to advance their training to assist our community in an even more meaningful way than at the basic level."

San Francisco's program works in partnership with the CaliforniaVolunteers Disaster Corps, which is a first-in-the-nation effort to professionalize, standardize and coordinate highly trained disaster volunteers statewide. The goal is to harness the power of the state's residents to create safer, stronger and more resilient communities.

"On the volunteer level, what I hear from our volunteers is that there is a super satisfaction in being able to bring their professionalism into play volunteering," Arteseros said. "The NERT response is very physical and gives that neighborhood connection, but a lot of the San Francisco volunteers have a level of professionalism in their day to day lives, and they really enjoy the opportunity to bring that into their volunteer commitment and role and use those skills."

In addition to the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) curriculum, the volunteers also go through Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) and National Incident Management



San Francisco Disaster Corps volunteers pack supplies for a deployment.

System (NIMS) training. San Francisco plans to use these volunteers to assist the fire department with incident management.

“Our volunteers are supporting our fire battalion chief and administering the command and control for a local disaster,” Arteseros said. “If we have a local disaster, our fire battalion chiefs will activate in quarters, and they will coordinate their geographical area. So locally, our volunteers are training and exercising with our battalion chiefs to support fire operations.”

The volunteers also receive an introduction to Disaster Corps, deployment, and communications training, as well as a series of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Independent Study Courses.

“The other thing from the fire service perspective,” Arteseros said, “it’s really a benefit to be able to say you have given someone a ‘type,’ a background check, and have credentialed them. It makes it much easier for a fire service to be willing to use volunteers or for a government entity to use volunteers. So from the volunteer side, there’s been a real satisfaction level that I’ve enjoyed, and from a professional side, there’s been much more acceptance of my volunteers that have this level of training than there was before with my basic volunteers.”

For that reason, California set out to “type” their volunteers. They begin at Type 3, which is the lowest level of advanced training and then move up to Type 2 and Type 1. Volunteers can level up through the training with prior deployment experience and by completing FEMA’s volunteer management course online. While the volunteers have never deployed without a staff person, this advanced training may evolve into a leadership track for their Disaster Corps cadre.

“As we move people into Type 1,” Arteseros said, “that’s where we begin considering them for if we ever deploy without a staff person...that Type 1 would become the lead for deployment.”

To date, the Disaster Corps volunteers have participated in two deployments outside the city as well as four practice deployments with other municipalities and drills with the San Francisco Fire Department. During the drills with the fire department, the Disaster Corps volunteers help fire battalion chiefs by tracking information, answering phone calls and administering the disaster on a command level.

The four practice deployments included traveling to Los Angeles, the City of Clovis, Menlo Park, and Riverside County to train with volunteers from those communities. The travel details are worked out with the requesting county as far as who is paying for transportation and accommodations.

“So then when I contact my volunteers, they know if we are driving ourselves in a carpool or if we are getting on an airplane together and boarding,” Arteseros said. “Our goal is no expense to the volunteers. In the spirit of covering that, even if the receiving county can’t cover all of it, we try for our department to cover the volunteers’ expenses, and if there is an expense that they will incur, they know upfront.”

Their first actual deployment supported the Tulare County Drought Emergency, where some residents had been without running water for up to a year. The county had been unable to reach some

community members and provide them with information on available services, such as relocation to an area with drinking water.

“So in Tulare, in this small community, there are homes that depend on well water to supply water to their homes,” Arteseros said. “So our volunteers mapped out the entire community and did a door to door education campaign, meeting people in the homes in low-income communities. Many people were home, and we were able to talk to the majority of the residents that lived in that community to get them connected with county services.”

In a recent deployment to support Lake County’s wildfire recovery, San Francisco Disaster Corps volunteers staffed the Commodity Points of Distribution (C-Pods) to provide community members with essential resources.

“They were the first interaction, sometimes, that residents had as they were returning to their homes,” Arteseros said. “They were issued safety gear, gloves, masks, for returning to their fire-stricken homes, drinking water, because drinking water was compromised at the time, and then information about how to access the Local Assistance Centers (LAC), which FEMA eventually took over from the county.”

With San Francisco’s Disaster Corps up and running, Arteseros is working to help other nearby communities secure this level of training and performance.

“I’m the only northern California program that is sanctioned by the state,” Arteseros said, “, so I’m looking at alternate sites to offer the deployment training in our homeland security region, which is 10 bay area counties.”

For more information on NERT and the Disaster Corps, please visit the [San Francisco Fire Department](#).