



Disaster training by Fire District 3 reaches 300 people; classes continue

CERT members search the west end of the Sequim Community School for earthquake "survivors" during a June 3 drill. (Michael Dashiell/Olympic Peninsula News Group)

Many on the North Olympic Peninsula are following the Boy Scouts' motto to be prepared — whether for earthquake, tsunami or any other kind of disaster.

Officials with Clallam County Fire District 3 report they've trained 280 Sequim-area residents and 30 people from Joyce for Community Emergency Response Teams in the past year.

Fire District 3 crew leaders' goal was to have trained 20 teams with 400 people — most in the Sequim area — but they are still encouraged by the results so far.

"We're thrilled," said Assistant Chief Dan Orr. "Before, we only had one team in Emerald Highlands, who decided to go through the program again. Now we have 11 teams from Gardiner to Deer Park and our first in the city limits."

Elsewhere in the county, some 54 people have been trained, according to Jamye Wisecup, program coordinator with the Clallam County Emergency Management Department.

Fire District 3 volunteers and officials have been training people in the Gardiner area of Jefferson County, said Lynn Sterbenz, director of the Jefferson County Department of Emergency Management.

Although Jefferson County as yet offers no CERT training, officials collaborate with Clallam County, Sterbenz said.

"They're doing such a great job that I get more and more requests in Jefferson County," she said, adding that the department aims to offer training for instructors and program coordinators sometime this year.

Jefferson County emergency department officials have concentrated on preparing neighborhoods through the Map Your Neighborhood program — a program also offered in Clallam County.

The Map Your Neighborhood program is designed to improve disaster readiness at the neighborhood level and teaches neighbors to rely on each other during the hours or days before fire, medical, police or utility responders arrive.

Some 153 neighborhoods have been through the program in Jefferson County, Sterbenz said. Many sign up during the annual All County Picnic — produced in a partnership between Local 20/20 and

the county department of emergency management — which was held for the fifth consecutive year last August.

Local 20/20's team of volunteer leaders work hard to prepare neighborhoods, Sterbenz said.

"We collaborate with neighborhood preparedness groups under Local 20/20 and also rely on fire departments and schools to conduct their own" training, Sterbenz said.

Blaine Zechenelly, disaster planning/emergency medical technician for Fire District 3, said at least 24 more trainees are slated to begin training in January.

"I think we've achieved a phenomenal level," he said. "I would have thought 150 people is a reasonable attempt. Our goal is to add several hundred more."

The county has scheduled training in Forks in January. About 15 people have requested training there, Wisecup said.

Disaster training

What they're training for is resiliency in any kind of disaster, from wildfires to catastrophic earthquakes, specifically the Cascadia Subduction Zone, a predicted 9.0 magnitude earthquake that, experts say, would devastate the Peninsula.

"I think people are realistically looking at [Cascadia] and know it might happen but [CERT] isn't just about the worst case scenario. It's anything," Zechenelly said.

He said recently there was a multiple-vehicle wreck in Gardiner in which a CERT volunteer assisted a State Trooper controlling traffic after arriving early on scene.

Since they began, Fire District 3 CERT volunteers have worked more than 13,000 hours, which Zechenelly said is a "huge statement by our people."

Said Orr: "We're concentrating on our piece of the puzzle."

Although Joyce is out of District 3's 142-mile service area, the fire department and Joyce residents often work together on emergency preparedness, Orr said.

"We understand our risks," said Charlie Meyer, CERT squad leader for the Carlsborg area and a leader with emergency preparedness at Sequim Community Church.

"We have a two-lane road with many people who depend on it as a supply line. In the aftermath [of a disaster], there will be a lot of islands and dropped bridges."

With so many possible situations in a disaster scenario, fire officials say first responders likely will be spread thin and far apart.

"These volunteers [who are now being trained in urban search and rescue classes too] are the first person to touch you," Zechenelly said, "and they may not reach you for days."

Ideally, District 3 officials hope to train between 600 and 700 people to cover Eastern Clallam County.

"With the number of resources needed, we've just started to scratch the surface of this effort," Zechenelly said. "No one should believe we're close to 100 percent."

Being prepared isn't only a young person's game, Meyer said.

“Some people feel, I’m old. How much help can I be?” he said. “But if they can walk, they can administer first aid or check out a building. They’re potentially a help. Folks who are HAM radio operators can be too.”

Meyer found CERT to be a way to stay active and to help out after retiring.

“It’s a way for a retiree who doesn’t normally go to work every morning to feel connected,” he said. “It serves the community in a real way.”

The CERT program, fire officials say, teaches a variety of things such as search and rescue, minor fire suppression and first aid.

Nancy McGovern, a registered nurse who retired after 44 years, works with Meyer in Carlsborg.

CERT has “been one of the most rewarding things I could have thought to do,” she said. “I’ve met some great people and now I feel like I know a little bit more about my neighbors.”

The impact of something like the Cascadia earthquake could be huge, McGovern said.

“Whether it happens in my lifetime or for someone in their middle years, one of the two of us is going to see this and preparation is everything,” she said.

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“If you’re prepared for something, you’re more likely to survive. You need a mindset that there are people that might need you.”

Training

County CERT training will begin Wednesday at the Forks High School Commons at 261 Spartan Ave. The class will meet for eight Wednesdays from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

CERT graduates will learn about providing basic medical assistance, how to extinguish small fires, and how to perform search and rescue techniques safely.

To register, contact Wisecup at 360-417-2525 or jwisecup@co.clallam.wa.us.

Fire District 3 CERT sessions are ongoing, depending on interest. Sessions will run from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Jan. 13, 20, and 27 with the first two sessions at Station 34 at 323 N. Fifth Ave., and the third at the Carlsborg Fire Station at 70 Carlsborg Road.

Typically, sessions are held on the second, third and fourth Saturdays of the month.

Those who are interested can contact Cindy Zechenelly at 360-504-2531 or 360-683-4242 or visit <https://ccfd3.org/>.

The Dungeness Hospital Guild will host Orr to discuss training for first responders at its monthly meeting at 10 a.m. Tuesday, Jan. 23, in the fellowship room of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, 525 N. Fifth Ave.

For more information in Jefferson County, see <http://www.co.jefferson.wa.us/950/Dept-of-Emergency-Management> or call 360-385-9368; or see <https://12020.org/emergency-preparedness/>.



Community Emergency Response Team members treat "victims" of an earthquake during a June 3 drill. In 2017, about 300 Sequim area residents joined the CERT program and fire officials with Clallam County Fire District 3 hope to get hundreds more in the coming year.



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Locals trained for 24 hours over three Saturdays at Sequim Community Church on how to fight small fires, conduct search operations and conduct basic first aid in a disaster scenario for the CERT program.