CERT Spontaneous Community Volunteer Policy

Sample for Discussion

Purpose

Following a major disaster, community members are likely to come to a CERT command post or other visible response location and offer to help. Many will not be trained CERT members or registered Disaster Service Workers (DSWs), but may still be able to provide valuable assistance.

Turning these volunteers away may result in people attempting to help on their own, potentially creating additional safety or coordination problems. At the same time, CERT cannot treat untrained volunteers as CERT members or emergency responders.

This policy establishes a temporary system for organizing spontaneous community volunteers so they can perform useful, low-risk work under appropriate direction until the County or another designated organization establishes formal volunteer coordination.

1. General Policy

During a major or catastrophic emergency, CERT may organize spontaneous community volunteers when:

- Community members are actively offering assistance;
- There are useful and reasonably safe tasks they can perform;
- The normal County volunteer coordination system through the Volunteer Center is not yet operating or readily accessible;
- Accepting and organizing the volunteers is safer and more effective than allowing uncoordinated self-deployment; and
- CERT has sufficient capacity to provide basic intake, assignment, safety instructions, and accountability.

This is intended as a temporary disaster capability, not as a replacement for the County's established volunteer management system.

2. Volunteer Status

A spontaneous community volunteer accepted under this policy:

- Is **not a CERT member**;

- Is **not a Disaster Service Worker**, unless separately registered as one through an authorized process;
- Is **not an emergency responder**;
- Does not acquire any special authority by volunteering; and
- May perform only the task or tasks specifically assigned.

Where appropriate, a limited number of individuals with particularly valuable emergency skills may be considered separately for temporary DSW registration in accordance with County policy.

3. When This System May Be Activated

For small or manageable emergencies, people offering assistance will be directed to the designated Volunteer Center or other County-designated volunteer organization. CERT may activate local spontaneous volunteer management following a major disaster when normal systems are unavailable, inaccessible, overwhelmed, or not yet functioning.

Examples could include a major earthquake, widespread communications failure, extensive transportation disruption, or another event in which community members begin gathering at CERT locations before formal volunteer coordination has been established. The CERT Incident Commander or designee will determine whether local spontaneous volunteer management is necessary.

4. Community Volunteer Intake

When significant numbers of people offer to help, CERT may establish a **Community Volunteer Intake Point** near, but when practical separate from, the CERT command post.

The intake process should be kept simple so that large numbers of people can be processed without interfering with emergency operations.

At a minimum, CERT should:

1. Record the volunteer's name and available contact information;
2. Ask about skills or experience particularly relevant to the emergency;
3. Identify any obvious limitations related to the proposed assignment;
4. Match the volunteer to an identified need;
5. Provide basic safety and assignment instructions;
6. Place the volunteer with a squad or supervisor; and
7. Record the volunteer's assignment and return or release.

Detailed interviews are not necessary for volunteers performing basic, low-risk tasks.

5. Identification of Specialized Skills

During intake, volunteers should be asked whether they possess skills that may be particularly useful during the emergency.

Examples include:

- Medical training;
- Structural engineering or building inspection experience;
- Electrical, utility, construction, or heavy-equipment experience;
- Amateur radio or other communications experience;
- Professional driving or transportation experience;
- Languages needed in the community;
- Emergency management, shelter, or disaster-response experience; and
- Other specialized skills relevant to identified needs.

Individuals reporting unusually valuable skills may be referred to CERT leadership for further evaluation. Professional or technical skills will not be assumed to be verified merely because a volunteer reports possessing them. Volunteers will not perform work requiring professional credentials or DSW status unless appropriately authorized.

6. Assignment Based on Need

CERT will organize **needed work rather than simply finding something for every volunteer to do**. Incident leadership should identify specific tasks, including:

- What needs to be accomplished;
- Number of volunteers needed;
- Location;
- Person responsible for the work;
- Anticipated duration;
- Necessary skills or physical abilities; and
- Significant safety restrictions.

Volunteers will then be matched to those assignments. The availability of volunteers does not, by itself, justify creating unnecessary work or expanding the scope of CERT operations.

7. Appropriate Community Volunteer Activities

Spontaneous community volunteers should generally be used for low-risk support activities that do not require CERT training or professional credentials.

Examples may include:

- Moving and organizing supplies;
- Food and water distribution;
- Setting up tables, signs, canopies, or community support areas;

- Clerical assistance and record keeping;
- Serving as runners or messengers;
- Delivering information to designated locations;
- Distributing emergency information;
- Assisting with volunteer check-in and checkout;
- Staffing community information points;
- Loading and unloading supplies;
- Delivering supplies within designated areas;
- Supporting logistics and neighborhood support activities;
- Assisting trained personnel with nontechnical tasks in areas determined to be safe; and
- Other low-risk tasks approved by CERT leadership.
- Acting as a scribe.

8. Restricted Activities

Spontaneous community volunteers who are not DSWs or appropriately credentialed will not independently perform emergency-response activities requiring specialized training or involving significant hazards. Unless separately authorized, they will not:

- Enter damaged or potentially unsafe structures;
- Conduct structural search and rescue;
- Perform fire suppression;
- Enter hazardous-material areas;
- Provide independent medical diagnosis or treatment;
- Perform technical utility work;
- Work around downed or potentially energized electrical lines;
- Perform law enforcement or security functions;
- Operate specialized equipment for which training is required; or
- Enter an area CERT leadership has determined to be unsafe.

Community volunteers may support trained responders when the support activity itself can be performed safely.

9. Squad Organization

Whenever practical, spontaneous volunteers will be organized into squads rather than managed individually. Each squad should have:

- A designated squad leader;
- A specific assignment;
- A defined work area;
- Safety restrictions;
- A designated supervisor or CERT contact; and
- A required time or method for checking back in.

Squad leaders may be trained CERT members or, for appropriate low-risk assignments, capable community volunteers selected to coordinate other volunteers. The level of CERT supervision should increase as the complexity or potential risk of the assignment increases.

10. Basic Safety Orientation

Before beginning work, every spontaneous community volunteer will receive basic instructions appropriate to the assignment. At a minimum, volunteers will be told:

1. Stay with your assigned squad or within your assigned area.
2. Perform only the work you have been assigned.
3. Do not enter damaged or potentially unsafe buildings.
4. Stop work and report conditions that appear dangerous or require trained responders.
5. Report back when the assignment is completed or at the designated check-in time.

Additional safety instructions will be provided when required by the assignment. Volunteers have the right to decline an assignment or stop work they believe is unsafe.

11. Identification

When practical, accepted spontaneous volunteers should receive temporary identification such as a badge, wristband, vest, or other visible marker.

Temporary identification should clearly identify the individual as a **Community Volunteer** and should not resemble CERT identification in a way that suggests the individual is a trained CERT member. Identification may include the volunteer's name, squad or assignment, date, and other information useful for accountability.

12. Accountability

CERT will maintain a simple record of spontaneous volunteers being used. When conditions permit, the record should include:

- Name;
- Contact information;
- Assignment or squad;
- Location;
- Squad leader or supervisor;
- Time assigned; and
- Time returned or released.

The system should be simple enough to function on paper without electricity, cellular service, or internet access.

13. Volunteers Who Cannot Be Used

CERT is not obligated to provide an assignment to everyone who offers to help. A person may be declined or released when:

- No suitable work is available;
- Adequate supervision cannot be provided;
- The individual cannot safely perform available work;
- The individual refuses to follow instructions or remain with an assigned squad;
- The individual appears impaired;
- The individual's behavior is unsafe or disruptive; or
- CERT leadership determines that accepting the individual would interfere with emergency operations.

When practical, individuals who cannot be used should be given information about where they may later offer assistance through the formal volunteer system.

14. Relationship to CERT Operations

Spontaneous community volunteers should supplement rather than replace trained CERT personnel. CERT members should concentrate on activities requiring their training whenever possible. Community volunteers should perform support work that frees trained personnel to address higher-priority emergency needs.

The Community Volunteer Intake Point should, when practical, be physically separated from the CERT command function so that large numbers of people seeking assignments do not interfere with incident management.

15. Transition to County Coordination

This system is intended to operate only during the period when normal County volunteer coordination is unavailable or unable to meet immediate local needs.

Once the County, Emergency Operations Center, designated Volunteer Center, Volunteer Reception Center, VOAD organization, or other authorized organization establishes volunteer coordination, CERT will notify that organization of its spontaneous volunteer activities and follow direction regarding continued use of those volunteers.

CERT should be prepared to provide:

- Approximate number of community volunteers being used;
- Locations where they are working;
- Types of assignments underway; and
- Any specialized volunteers or resources that have been identified.

CERT will discontinue independent intake of new spontaneous volunteers when directed to do so. Existing squads may be completed, transferred to the formal volunteer system, reassigned, or released as directed.

16. Planning Before a Disaster

CERT should prepare in advance for spontaneous volunteers by maintaining:

- Paper volunteer intake forms;
- Assignment and checkout logs;
- Simple temporary volunteer identification;
- Written basic safety instructions;
- Examples of appropriate and prohibited assignments;
- A method for creating and displaying current volunteer needs;
- Supplies for establishing a Community Volunteer Intake Point; and
- A procedure for reporting volunteer operations to the County when communications become available.

Spontaneous volunteer management should periodically be included in CERT exercises.

Guiding Principle

Following a major disaster, community members will want to help. CERT's goal is not to turn those individuals into CERT members or emergency responders. Our goal is to channel their willingness to help into useful, reasonably safe, organized work and reduce uncoordinated self-deployment until the County's formal volunteer-management system is functioning.