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NSU's emergency team enhances campus, community safety

The preemptive planning a college campus must undertake to deal with a natural disaster, toxic spill or a suspicious package in a building is disquieting, but in such an event, the Northeastern State University community has immediate recourse. The Campus Community Emergency Response Team (C-CERT) can be there in a flash.

The C-CERT is a group of trained volunteers who can help first responders in the field. All C-CERT members receive training from the Department of Homeland Security which includes light search and rescue, first aid and triage, light firefighting, disaster preparedness, hazard recognition, mitigation and the Incident Command System- the national response protocols for emergencies.

Hall manager Leslie Byrd said the C-CERT members include, but are not limited to, campus police, housing hall managers, associate hall managers, resident assistants, parking attendants and other professional level staff members.

"We have 59 trained C-CERT members in our campus community," said Cpt. James Bell of NSU's Department of Public Safety and Campus Police. "Most of them are housing employees, but the training is open to anyone."

Bell said C-CERT started in the Fall 2010 semester and its first training session was in August. The team was implemented to help ensure the safety of the campus community in an emergency.

"The police department has very few officers to respond in an emergency and other first responders will not be familiar with the campus," said Bell. "The C-CERT can help in many ways during an emergency."

C-CERT members demonstrated their training and abilities to respond to different emergencies in the full scale emergency exercise Nov. 9. C-CERT members worked with Tahlequah police, local firefighters, emergency medical services, campus police and other agencies.

"It was the first time the local fire and EMS worked with a C-CERT," said Bell. "They did not know what to expect, but I think everyone was pleased with how they organized into teams and responded to the needs of the campus community."

During the drill, C-CERT members were instrumental in responding to the drill, including the "meth lab explosion," by evacuating "victims" from buildings, setting up a triage area and tending to people contained within.

"There were unattended victims in the building due to lack of manpower or responders waiting for decontamination," said Bell. "The C-CERT members were able to get into the building and almost overwhelm the ambulances with evacuees."

Bell said the team was such an enhancement of manpower that other agencies sought its assistance, and a purpose of C-CERT is to serve off-campus in Tahlequah and Cherokee County.

"In the event of a real emergency, it will be extremely beneficial if the emergency services not related to NSU can learn to communicate effectively and listen to the C-CERT suggestions as we know the area and layout of the buildings," said resident assistant Heather Emery.

For emergency situations in university housing, the RAs are the first line of contact. Byrd said combining C-CERT with the RAs better equips them to serve the students.

"In the near future, should any major emergency happen on campus, there are first responders that are able to immediately begin taking control of the situation until emergency personnel can arrive," said Darrin Priest, associate hall manager.

Another C-CERT training session is being planned for the spring semester due to the number of interested students, faculty and staff members.

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