

700 Portlanders team up, take disaster preparedness seriously

Trained citizens are neighbors' best defense

By JENNIFER ANDERSON
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They fight fires, they dress wounds, they know how to dig through rubble to retrieve victims of collapsed buildings.

But they're not firefighters or emergency workers. They are ordinary Portland citizens who take disaster preparedness seriously.

To date, at least 700 people are active participants in a citywide program called the Neighborhood Emergency Team. Following in the footsteps of Los Angeles and San Francisco, Portland in 1996 became the third U.S. city to implement such a program, with a curriculum at first based largely on earthquake response.

Shortly after, the Federal Emergency Management Agency adopted a standard curriculum for Special Emergency Response Teams and promoted the model throughout the country; today more than 90 U.S. cities have such teams.

Although geography dictates the course material — whether it be volcanic eruptions, floods, tornadoes or hurricanes — the principle behind the training is the same, said Rachel Jacky, a Portland Bureau of Fire and Rescue Services worker who oversees community emergency services.

The idea is "that citizens need to be trained to help their neighbors and keep themselves safe and that they're an important resource in a disaster, not just victims that need help," Jacky said.

In Portland, the six-week training course is held quarterly for anyone 14 or older who is interested. It is free to participants,

paid for by the Portland Bureau of Fire and Rescue Services budget with some federal dollars paying for trainers' courses.

Participants include former emergency workers, teachers, students and doctors.

John Lebert, a former Clackamas County firefighter and emergency medical technician, is head of the Hillsdale Neighborhood Emergency Team.

A team member since 1996, he says his 22-person team meets monthly to review training, conduct drills to prepare for different situations, review the use of equipment and discuss how to get more people involved.

Since the events of Sept. 11 and America's military strikes in Afghanistan, he said, the team has reviewed its training and found it is well prepared for any disaster.

The team members did, however, decide to review their response to biological attacks. "The training we received and the knowledge we have about hazardous chemical spills like a tanker truck overturning applies quite a bit," he said. "Large bombs would put a building in the same condition as a severe earthquake."

In an earthquake or ice storm, he said, the team would don its red helmets and orange vests and meet at a staging area to set up a command post. Then it would canvass the neighborhood to assess damage and respond to incidents reported by other citizens.

"The main goal is to free up the emergency services for the heavy duty rescue workers that have the training and equipment, and take some of the smaller stuff,"



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Volunteer-in-training Brandon Wooters takes part in a triage drill in his final session of the Neighborhood Emergency Team training. In the exercise, volunteer Daniel Houghton pretended to have been impaled with a metal rod.

Lebert said.

"We train and we plan, but people don't want to have to use the training," Lebert said. "We don't want to see anybody get hurt or killed."

The Neighborhood Emergency Teams can be activated by the fire bureau or can self-activate — most likely in an event that cripples emergency communications.

Several teams — each with its own acronym — complement Neighborhood Emergency Teams. Businesses in Portland

may sign up as Business Emergency Teams.

In Gresham, several agencies work to train members for the Neighborhood Emergency Response Team. At least 250 people have been trained since the program began in May 1999. Two classes will be held next spring.

For more information on courses, call Rachel Jacky at 503-823-1260.

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