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Emergency volunteers' debut lauded

By Joe Hughes

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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The first-ever activation for San Diego's Community Emergency Response Teams is getting high marks for its work during last month's wildfires.

CERT members are volunteers trained to help fire agencies in first aid, basic search and rescue, logistical support, evacuee assistance and other essential duties during disasters.

"Their training and commitment really paid off," San Diego Fire Chief Tracy Jarman said of CERT volunteers' efforts. "The dedication to the job was beyond comparison and really made a positive difference."

The city of San Diego had 107 volunteers on duty the second day of the firestorms. More than 700 volunteers make up San Diego's CERT unit and there are 3,000 CERT volunteers countywide.

Firefighters who battled flames almost nonstop for a week were grateful.

"We could not have done the job without these people," said firefighter-paramedic Michel Bowidowicz, who helps coordinate the San Diego city program.

Stasia Place, emergency services coordinator for the County Office of Emergency Services, said 13 of the county's 25 CERT units – about 600 volunteers – were activated. Activation is a legal term that permits state liability and insurance coverage for team members in cases of injuries.

"Their effort was outstanding," said Place, emphasizing that many volunteers went above and beyond in their duties.

The Rancho Santa Fe CERT volunteers, for instance, manually unlocked electrically controlled driveway gates so firefighters could gain access to homes for fire protection during a power outage.

On Palomar Mountain, the volunteers helped residents apply a fire-protectant gel to homes as fires approached.

Other teams helped with evacuation, shelter work and traffic control and acted as fire spotters looking for flare-ups.

Coronado launched the region's first CERT unit in 1997, and others were created after the deadly Cedar fire in 2003. The first CERT unit in the country formed after the Northridge earthquake in Los Angeles in January 1994.

San Diego CERT volunteers readied dozens of old fire rigs with hoses, tools and other gear, enabling the engines to be sent to fire zones.

Others cleared space for the department's helicopter, offloaded cargo, assisted residents and staffed evacuation centers.

CERT volunteer Gloria Applegate, 52, who manages The Frame Station, a picture-framing business in Mission Hills, was one of the first to get the summons the afternoon of Oct. 21. It was no surprise.

“I live in North Park and could see the smoke,” Applegate said.

For the next several days, Applegate helped out at Station 28 in Kearny Mesa, a local command center. She set up cots at a nearby hotel ballroom for firefighters and also shuttled crews and equipment to their rigs.

Another volunteer, David Hayes, 49, an Escondido Realtor, also was on the lines early in the fires. Hayes volunteered because he watched the Cedar fire rage through San Diego County on television from his Sabre Springs home in 2003.

“I felt useless; I wanted to help,” he said.


Hayes got called out at 11:30 p.m. the first Sunday of the fire, grabbed his so-called go bag – personal gear – and drove to Rancho Bernardo. It was dark and smoky. A ring of fire could be seen in the distance. The wind was intense.

“Out of nowhere, a shopping cart just flew across the roadway, right in front of me,” Hayes said. “I just missed it.”

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