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CERT graduates 16 volunteers in emergency response class

By Holly Bowers

For the Journal Inquirer

VERNON — The region has 16 more people ready to help in the event of an emergency, with the graduation of a new Community Emergency Response Team.

This CERT group is a regional collaboration between Ellington, Somers, and Vernon — an effort that's thought to be the first in the state, Vernon Deputy Emergency Management Director Allen Sheridan said.

The towns have been training CERT volunteers for about six months and expect to offer several classes each year, Sheridan said.

The recent CERT graduates underwent 24 hours of classroom training in first aid, triage, light search and rescue, terrorism awareness, sheltering, and commodity distribution. They will continue to receive monthly training.

The goal of the CERT program is to "set ourselves up to be better prepared" Sheridan said.

The program readies volunteers to help in disaster situations, freeing trained emergency personnel to do their jobs more efficiently.

The volunteers also will help to relieve overtaxed emergency organizations in the event of a disaster. Sheridan pointed to the shelters organized by the Red Cross during last year's cold weather. Now that CERT graduates have been trained in sheltering, they will be able to handle a similar situation.

Sheridan explained that CERT volunteers also are trained in situational awareness.

When disaster strikes, spontaneous volunteers often don't recognize the hazards of their actions and can do more harm than good, he said.

The CERT program trains volunteers to recognize the need for professional assistance.

CERT began as a program under the Federal Emergency Manage-

ment Agency in 1985 after volunteers responded to wildfires in California.

By recognizing the need for local volunteers in the event of a disaster, communities can return to normalcy faster, Sheridan said.

So far, 50 volunteers from Ellington, Somers, and Vernon have joined CERT. The class that just graduated included 12 people from Vernon and four from Ellington, ranging from 21 to 70 years of age, he said.

Sheridan emphasized that the program welcomes all volunteers age 21 and older. Organizers are looking for "lay people who have an interest in helping their community."

People with multilingual backgrounds are encouraged to volunteer, as are veterinarians and veterinary assistants, Sheridan said. Pet sheltering is an important aspect of emergency response because of pet owners' unwillingness to leave animals in an emergency.

Anyone interested in learning more about CERT is asked to contact Sheridan, 860-338-0869.