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Fort Bend County Emergency Management has graduation for citizen support team

By Cheryl Skinner

A total of 20 area citizens successfully completed a training session that will allow these volunteers to participate in various projects with the Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management.

The FBCOEM held its first graduation ceremony for the 20 volunteers who had completed its Citizens Support Team (CST) Training, a six-session course that focused on EOC Center (EOC) activities. In addition to the in-house training, volunteers were required to complete two Independent-Study FEMA courses on the basics of Incident Command, and the National Weather Service's SkyWarn Severe Weather Spotter Training. The classes consisted of citizens as well as members of

the Fort Bend County Emergency Management Radio Operator's Group (EMROG) who desired the cross training.

Jeff Braun, Fort Bend County Emergency Management Coordinator, said he realized early on the importance of setting up a volunteer program.

"At my new employee orientation three years ago, a volunteer approached me and said that she was assigned to the EOC when it was activated. I said 'that's great. What are you assigned to do?'

She said, 'I haven't a clue.' At that time, I realized that we needed to develop a program to train employees and volunteers on their roles and responsibilities in times of a crisis."

The CST Program was in development over a period of 2 years.

"We wanted to make sure we created a self-sustaining program that provided the EOC with a list of well trained, enthusiastic citizens who want to serve their community in times of disaster," said Danny Jan, Assistant Emergency Management Coordinator, and CST program coordinator.

Development of the program became critical after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The two major storms not only peaked community interest in the County's Office of Emergency Management but gave officials insight into what was needed to get the job done and how volunteers should be utilized.

Michael Kahlenberg, one of the graduates from the program, said he was excited to see the program come into fruition. "I

have been volunteering with different organizations over the past 20 years, and in fact was in the first class of graduates of the original Citizens Emergency Response Team (CERT) in 1986- the Los Angeles Emergency Response Team. This opportunity is unique, since it gives us a way to help the first responders on the front line and also to help the community be better prepared."

Braun emphasized the importance of volunteers while addressing the graduates. "Over the past two years, the county has made major improvements to the EOC, such as installing new computers, plasmas, and other necessary technology.

But the most important thing in the building is not that technology...it is you. Without volunteers

such as you, all this technology is useless. Without trained people to answer the phones, assist at the consoles, and assist the EOC in general, we will not be able to complete our mission to provide this county the best assistance it deserves when disaster strikes."

The State of Texas Governor's Division of Emergency

Management recently recognized the level of organization that went into the program. Staff members from the Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management were asked to present a session highlighting the CST program at the State Homeland Security Conference in San Antonio in late November.