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Coming Together to Build a Shelter

Cathy Dausman



Standing on left, instructor Rick Palmer Photo Cathy Dausman

Twenty one Moragans abandoned the shelter of their cozy homes on a rainy Saturday morning to learn how to manage a temporary shelter in the event of a disaster affecting their town. They were all volunteers taking a Red Cross shelter training session at Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church (MVPC).

The session was organized by Ken Tom of Moraga. Tom, a volunteer partner liaison for Red Cross said it's been at least two years since the last Lamorinda workshop.

Attendees at this session included members of the local Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), two churches (MVPC and St. Monica), Moraga Recreation Director Jay Ingram and Robert Priebe, Moraga's Chief of Police.

Red Cross instructors Briana Taylor and Rick Palmer led an interactive workshop presentation on a shelter's basic "three S's" -the site, the stuff, and the staff, where the legal responsibility rests to shelter citizens - the government - and various relief levels, ranging from a house fire displacing a single family for a short time to natural disasters like a large earthquake or hurricane . Much of the current training material came from Red Cross experiences

after Hurricane Katrina.

Taylor, Palmer and class tackled the realities of opening, running and closing a shelter, housing and feeding its residents, coping with and diffusing stress, squelching rumors and responding to media, all with the expectation of having the shelter up and running in as little as two hours.

Volunteers developed an appreciation for myriad logistical challenges. They learned that folks get hungry before they get sleepy and that pizza will likely be the first hot meal offered to shelter residents. They learned it takes 25 volunteers to staff a 300 person shelter round the clock. Students also received an eighty page manual for Shelter Operations. Shelter operations, not shelter locations.

Locations are never disclosed ahead of time, says Carole Crawford, Manager of Disaster Services for the American Red Cross in Contra Costa County. That could be dangerous, as each potential shelter must be inspected and evaluated for safety before it is opened. Crawford says Red Cross likes to look for facilities with showers and kitchens on site.

Upon completing the course, each trainee still said they would be willing to volunteer as a shelter manager for the Red Cross- Neighbors helping neighbors.

No training sessions are currently scheduled in Lafayette or Orinda, but a second Shelter Training session will be held February 11, 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church, 10 Moraga Valley Lane. Enrollment is limited. For more information, e-mail Ken Tom at ttkentom@aol.com.

Red Cross Fast Facts

Red Cross allies itself with CERT in Lamorinda, in what Red Cross calls a partnership training program.

Moraga's Red Cross volunteer liaison is Ken Tom.

Lafayette's Red Cross volunteer liaison is Brianna Taylor.

Tom and Taylor are joint volunteer liaison for Orinda as well.

- Red Cross in Contra Costa County falls under the Golden Gateway Region.

- The San Francisco Bay Area boasts 400,000 Red Cross trained volunteers.

- Contra Costa County has 220 volunteers serving a population of about two million.

- Approximately 40 primary shelters (capacity 300) and 90 large shelters (capacity 100) are scattered throughout Contra Costa County. Red Cross is actively engaged in adding to these facilities.

- Red Cross maintains 20 supply containers in the county.

One container holds shelter necessities for 300 people; eight containers hold necessities for 200 people; and 11 containers hold necessities for 100 people: (one cot per person and two blankets per cot).

- Moraga has a container.
- Lafayette has a container.

Currently scheduled Red Cross Partner Exercises within the county:

- San Ramon April 26
- Antioch TBD (likely August)
- Rossmoor October

For more information, or to volunteer, go online at www.redcrossbayarea.org.

Or contact Carole Crawford, (925) 603-7414;
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