The District of Columbia Community Emergency Response Team (CERT):

Does the CERT Program operate according to NCO principles?

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Views expressed in this presentation are the author's own—and do not reflect the views of the DC Government, the CERT Program, and Neighborhood Corps

Research Questions

- Can the principles of Network Centric Operations extend from military operations to local governments, first responders, and ultimately local citizens?

- Does the DC CERT Program operate according to the principles of NCO?

Constraints

- Two major constraints: time and the response rate to the surveys

- Inclement weather cancelled several events, which reduced the opportunities to collect more data and interact with more members

- Biggest constraint was finding participants to answer questionnaire. Privacy issues made it difficult to find participants

- The challenge of finding willing participants mirrors the trend of declining involvement in emergency services

Background on the CERT Program

- Program began in Los Angeles in 1985 when city officials visited Tokyo and Mexico after Natural Disasters. Pioneer program is CERT-LA
- Part of DC Citizens Corps Program and District Response Plan
- CERT teaches members basic first aid, fire suppression, and light/search rescue skills
- Course occurs over six evening sessions
- Members receive packs at the end of the course with emergency equipment
- Course culminates with disaster drill

Explanation of NCO CF

- Four Key NCO Domains: Physical, Information, Social, Cognitive

- Physical: Objects, Settings, Effects, the Network

- Information: Data and quality of information

- Cognitive: Thought processes in individuals' minds

- Social: The relationship between people, organizations, practices, and cultures

Applying the NCO CF to the CERT Program

- CERT is part of the emergency network that connects ordinary citizens, first responders, and the DC Government together

- Mitigation addresses how governments and individuals take steps to minimize the pain, suffering, and financial loss inflicted by natural disasters and terrorist attacks

- Two types of mitigation: soft and hard

- Hard mitigation refers to creating infrastructures

- Soft mitigation addresses the roles of individuals, governments, and professionals

Applying the NCO CF to the CERT Program Cont.

- CERT is a soft mitigation program

- DC Response network includes: DC Government→ DC First Responders→ CERT/Neighborhood Corps→ Ordinary Citizens

- Terrorist attacks/natural disasters disrupt the emergency response network; first responders are overwhelmed

- Example: If major hubs such as JFK or O'Hare were to become disconnected, air traffic worldwide would slow significantly

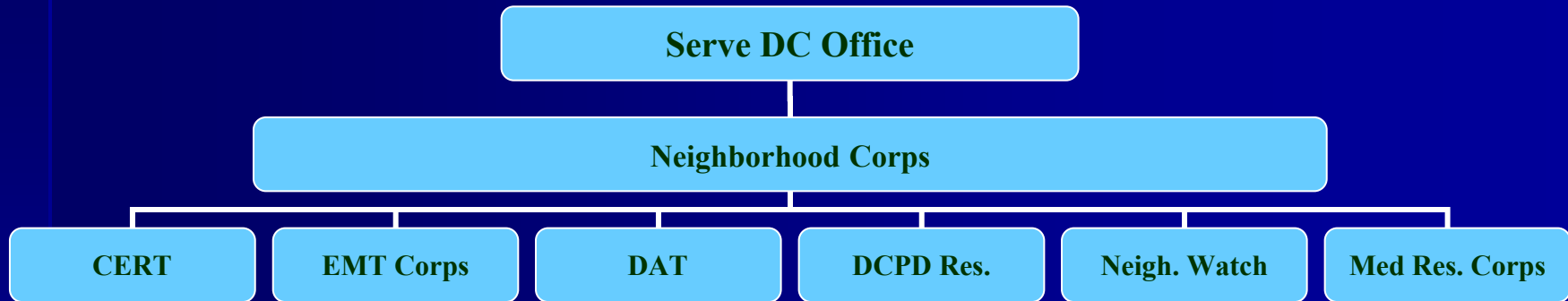- CERT seeks to fill the gap when professional resources are overburdened

Applying the NCO CF to the CERT Program Cont.

- Key NCO-related aspect of CERT program is the Incident Command System (ICS)
- First member on the scene is the Incident Commander (IC)
- CERTs report to IC
- IC delegates authority and key personnel such as the Operations Section (OS) Chief
- OS Chief divides teams and assigns responsibilities

Neighborhood Corps (NC)

- After members complete CERT training, further contact continues with NC program
- NC unites members of all DC Citizen Corps Programs together, including CERT
- NC functions according to the principle that neighborhoods are best able to organize themselves
- NC and CERT officials are working together to incorporate DC Citizen Corps Program Volunteers into DC's Emergency Management Agency's exercises

Organization of DC Citizen Corps Programs

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                         Serve DC Office
                                |
                        Neighborhood Corps
      ┌──────────┬──────────┬───────┴───────┬───────────┬──────────────┐
    CERT    EMT Corps      DAT         DCPD Res.   Neigh. Watch   Med Res. Corps
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CERT Disaster Drill
Feb 12, 2005

- The drill consisted of a demonstration from a Washington Gas representative, two exercises, and a final discussion; 21 out of 23 CERT members attended
- Members learned how to shut off gas
- Key debate over IC and how to identify him/her
- In some cases the packs were incomplete, but this is due to funding issues
- Drill not as realistic as author anticipated; but because drills cost $30-40K, it was what the DC EMA budget allowed
- Relation to NCO: Lack of standardized equipment affects members' ability to network and participate fully

CERT Disaster Drill
Feb 12, 2005 Cont.

- CERT members lack communication system; problem due to lack of strong funding

- While Neighborhood Corps Coordinators (to be explained later) have radios, CERT members do not!

- No clear definition of the IC and CERT ICS system

- Thus, different neighborhoods could create different ICS systems, leading to potential interoperability difficulties

NC Emergency Equipment Usage Meeting Feb 17, 2005

- 7 out of 14 members showed up for training
- Topic discussed was the use of emergency radios and the NC Coordinator position
- Key discussion on how to define IC and to define NC cells
- Only coordinators received radios; this is due to funding constraints
- Radios were of low frequency; interference a problem
- No clear procedures for responding to situations
- Relation to NCO: No clear mechanisms for achieving situational awareness, lack of clear ICS standards could create potential interoperability difficulties

Analysis of Interview Data

- Persons interviewed included:
  - Renee Evans, manager of DC CERT Program;
  - Darrell Duane, CERT Instructor;
  - Kevin Lee, Manager of Neighborhood Corps
- Evans envisions CERT functioning as a program that enables citizens in their own neighborhoods to work together
- She relies on CERT members "to spread the word"

Analysis of Interview Data Cont.

- Duane is a volunteer firefighter in Fairfax County; runs the CERT-Trained List Serv

- List Serv enables minimal level of communication between CERT and NC members

- Not optimistic about CERT/NC Members' abilities to collaborate during a real disaster/attack

- CERT provides a "basic idea of what is possible"; only 5% of members participate beyond initial training

- Key challenge facing program is the issue of volunteer management/retention

Analysis of Interview Data Cont.

- Kevin Lee stated that NC program began in August of 2004 at a forum held at the convention center

- NC networks exist in Wards 1, 3, 6, 7, and 8. Wards 2, 4, and 5 are next

- To market the program Lee attends a large number of community events. He emails members monthly with information about volunteer opportunities

- NC's communication system is being designed, although it is in early stages

Survey of CERT Members

- Questionnaire sent to 19 CERT members; only 5 responded
- Motivations for joining included the desire to save lives, serve the community, learn emergency skills
- Participants conceded that networking with each other was difficult because people did not exchange information
- One participant cited "great barriers were erected to find out who these people [CERT members] are and where they live"
- Relation to NCO: Not being able to find other members makes achieving communication and situational awareness more difficult

Conclusions: CERT and NCO

- CERT currently does not operate according to NCO principles
- Program's organizational structure is somewhat blurry; distinction between CERT and NC is unclear
- Lack of clear organization structure prevents the establishment of clear tactics, techniques, and procedures
- In turn this prevents members from learning proper training procedures/skills
- Overlap of multiple law enforcement/first responder agencies limits volunteer opportunities for members

Conclusions:
CERT and NCO Cont.

- Not enough drills take place due to funding issues
- Consequently members do not know how to operate effectively and network with each other
- No clear definition of IC or ICS system; no clear definition of NC cells
- This leads to no clear communication system or methods for members to collaborate horizontally during an attack/disaster
- In these conditions achieving situational awareness would be difficult

Conclusions: CERT and NCO Cont.

Recommendations to Improve Program across Each of the Four Domains:

- Physical Domain: Improve equipment packs and communications systems

- Information Domain: Foster and encourage Duane's list serve

- Cognitive Domain: Provide more opportunities for training; standardize tactics, techniques, and procedures; clarify and refine these TTPs to better refine members' thought processes

- Social Domain: Develop better mechanisms for members to interact with each other

General/Final Conclusions

- Although the program faces challenges, CERT has made impressive groundwork in its first two years of its existence

- Program needs better collaboration and communications systems so that members could interact better with each other; improved funding could address its weaknesses

- One key area of improvement needs to be volunteer recruitment and retention; this is a problem across all volunteer EMS services

Questions?