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## Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina's Advanced Local Emergency Response Team (ALERT)

### SUMMARY

Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina's Advanced Local Emergency Response Team (ALERT) is trained to deploy rapidly, provide operational assistance, and treat patients during mass casualty incidents, thereby supporting and enhancing regional emergency resources.

### BACKGROUND

The impetus for Charlotte, North Carolina, to establish ALERT came in February 1998 when a man carried a bomb containing a biological agent into the Mecklenburg County Courthouse. Although the incident was successfully resolved, mistakes made during the response highlighted Charlotte-Mecklenburg's lack of preparedness. For instance, Incident Command was established fifty yards from the courthouse, well in range of a bomb blast. After the event, representatives from the region's medical and public safety communities met to develop an interagency medical response team. Subsequently, Charlotte-Mecklenburg obtained a Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS) contract for its project in September 1998. ALERT began training shortly thereafter and became fully operational in September 2001.

### GOALS

ALERT's goal is to mitigate mass casualty incidents in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area by treating victims promptly and protecting the community's infrastructure.

### DESCRIPTION

ALERT is a local, interagency response team primarily focused on mass casualty incidents involving Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). It includes over 100 participants from the following eleven agencies:

- Carolinas HealthCare System
- Charlotte Fire Department
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department
- Federal Bureau of Investigation
- Mecklenburg County Medical Examiner's Office
- Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Department
- Mecklenburg Emergency Medical Services Agency

- Mecklenburg Health Department
- Transportation Security Administration
- United States Environmental Protection Agency
- United States Marshals Service

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has recognized Charlotte-Mecklenburg as one of the nation's best prepared communities because of ALERT. ALERT has four key elements that contribute to its effectiveness: its team concept, command structure, highly skilled personnel, and enhanced medical infrastructure.

### ***Organized Around a Team Concept***

ALERT's design relies on collaboration among its member agencies. This collaboration is reflected in four key ways: plan development, plan implementation, equipment, and uniforms.

#### **Plan development**

Each Charlotte-Mecklenburg emergency response agency dedicated personnel to facilitate the planning, communication, and development of ALERT. The program's operational guidelines and standards were developed through conferences among law enforcement, fire, emergency medical response, public health, and healthcare system agencies.

#### **Plan implementation**

ALERT members plan, prepare, and respond as one unit. This saves time and resources and allows emergency personnel to focus on an objective, rather than their particular agency. Each ALERT agency has a designated emergency role(s), which helps mitigate interagency conflicts.

#### **Equipment purchase**

ALERT's equipment is standardized and has been approved by all member agencies. This extends to personal protective equipment (PPE), communication systems, and other emergency response gear.

#### **Uniforms**

ALERT personnel wear a standardized team uniform with nametags for personal recognition and familiarization. The uniform fosters cohesion and nourishes ALERT's team concept. Program coordinators point to the incorporation of uniforms as one of the best decisions made by the command staff.

### ***Two-Tiered Command Structure***

ALERT is guided by a Policy Group and Inter-Agency Coordinators, each of which hold regular meetings and exchange information frequently. This command structure ensures the efficient use of resources and encourages interagency cooperation.

#### **Policy Group**

The Policy Group is composed of executive-level managers from each ALERT agency, including the chief of police, fire chief, and county health department director. The Group considers the Inter-Agency Coordinators' recommendations and makes final decisions regarding ALERT's operations, finances, and policy.

#### **Inter-Agency Coordinators**

The Inter-Agency Coordinators are working-level command staff that conduct planning, develop budgets, and submit recommendations to the Policy Group. Additionally, members

of the Inter-Agency Coordinators are responsible for the direction of their own agency's members, coordination of team training, and equipment purchase suggestions.

### ***Interagency Cadre of Skilled Personnel***

ALERT consists of an interagency cadre of personnel who are:

- Experts in their field;
- Cross-trained in "gross" WMD response skills;
- Familiar with other emergency responders and their roles; and
- Special deputies of the United States Marshals Service.

### **Experts in their field**

ALERT personnel come from a wide range of disciplines and are selected based on seniority, skill set, and willingness to serve. They consist of local and federal emergency responders tactically trained in HazMat management, explosive device disposal, special weapons and tactics, evidence recovery, and emergency medicine.

### **Cross-trained in WMD response skills**

ALERT personnel are cross-trained in tasks and functions required to respond to a WMD event. During ALERT's initial years, monthly training was conducted to familiarize members with important WMD response skills, including mass decontamination procedures, medical triage protocols, scene security, evidence preservation, personal protective equipment use, and the identification, characteristics, and medical symptoms of various WMD. All ALERT members are proficient in the aforementioned skills and capable of the following:

- Establishing disaster scene zones of operation for protection
- Establishing decontamination corridors for ambulatory and nonambulatory patients
- Performing patient decontamination
- Assisting in patient movement
- Helping medical personnel with triage and treatment algorithms

### **Familiar with other ALERT personnel and emergency roles**

ALERT members regularly interact with one another and are familiar with each others' emergency functions and how those functions interface with their own. This familiarity helps build trust among ALERT agencies, thereby improving the team's overall operation and morale. ALERT coordinators cite team chemistry as the key to ALERT's success.

### **Special Deputies of the United States Marshals Service**

All law enforcement members of ALERT are sworn in as special deputies of the United States Marshals Service. This designation enables ALERT members to cross into other states, counties, and cities for ALERT-related duties without concern about jurisdictional boundaries. This is especially important as one of the two nuclear power plants in the Charlotte area lies across state lines in nearby South Carolina.

### **Enhanced Medical Infrastructure**

ALERT medical agencies have improved their WMD treatment capabilities by:

- **Educating and equipping emergency medical personnel:** Hospital emergency personnel have the requisite knowledge and equipment to complete decontamination procedures in level C PPE.

- **Retrofitting facility infrastructures:** Charlotte-Mecklenburg's primary receiving hospital for WMD victims, Carolinas Medical Center, has been extensively renovated to address large numbers of contaminated patients.
- **Building the Carolinas Mobile Emergency Department (MED)-1:** Carolinas MED-1 is the nation's first mobile level-1 trauma center and is capable of providing comprehensive medical care activities in a pre-hospital environment.

### ***Local WMD Response Team Model***

ALERT was chosen by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) as the basis for a local WMD response team model. PERF's model outlines the equipment, training, and personnel resources needed for a community the size of Charlotte-Mecklenburg to achieve both a basic and full level of preparedness. Communities can use the model as a guideline for developing their own collaborative approaches to emergency and response operations.

## **REQUIREMENTS**

### ***Keys to Success***

- **Constant Interaction:** ALERT's success stems from interaction between different disciplines and their command elements. Key operational personnel from all emergency responder disciplines communicate on a first-name basis. ALERT's cohesion makes it an elite and effective unit.
- **Preparedness:** The ALERT program has acquired the equipment, training, and personnel requirements needed for a basic level of disaster preparedness. Accordingly, ALERT is properly outfitted to train for and respond to natural and WMD disasters.

### ***Training***

ALERT team members must remain proficient in their own specialties while keeping their cross-trained skills sharp. Each agency is responsible for maintaining the expertise of its ALERT personnel and holding regularly scheduled training. In addition, the entire ALERT group meets quarterly for a team-training exercise. These sessions are designed to measure ALERT's overall operating efficiency. In the past, team-training sessions have focused on various aspects of chemical and biological terrorism.

### ***Resources***

The ALERT program is funded through local and federal funding. ALERT has received over \$2.5 million from its MMRS contract, with additional federal funding provided by the Department of Defense Domestic Preparedness Program and the Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Mecklenburg County also made a one-time contribution of \$500,000 for the purchase of ALERT transportation vehicles.

### ***Links***

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg ALERT: Development of the Advanced Local Emergency Response Team:  
[LLIS.gov ID#10074](#)
- Carolinas Mobile Emergency Department-1 Homepage:  
<http://www.carolinasmed-1.org>