

Dearborn CERT Supports Community Response Team in the United Arab Emirates

An ongoing partnership between Michigan emergency managers and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is spanning language barriers and thousands of miles to build an international preparedness partnership.

Given its desert environment, the UAE faces a number of climate-related challenges, including extreme heat and sandstorms. In addition, the country's relatively new infrastructure presents emergency response officials with new logistical challenges, such as evacuating very tall buildings in the event of an emergency. In 2008, the UAE visited official emergency response authorities of several countries, seeking ways to engage the country's youth and young adults in community service. UAE officials identified the United States' CERT program and the Swedish Civil Defense League as models for training and engagement.

To expand its CERT cooperation, UAE officials looked to partner with Dearborn, Michigan, a city, which according to the 2010 U.S. Census is home to the largest percentage (nearly 40 percent) of Arab-Americans in the United States. As a result of its large Arab population, Dearborn officials had begun an effort to translate the CERT curriculum into Arabic shortly before meeting with UAE officials in 2009. Kevin Sweeney, Michigan State Police Sergeant, and Brad Smith, Dearborn Emergency Management Homeland Security Director, spearheaded the translation effort with the support of others in the community.

In 2009, Sweeney and Smith travelled to Abu Dhabi, UAE, to share the value of the CERT program and begin the process of training local instructors. Between 2009 and 2010, Smith travelled to the UAE four times to help establish support for and assist with implementation of a UAE CERT program. In 2010, Smith and Rachel Jacky, then the National CERT Program Director, served as guest speakers at the UAE's Crisis and Emergency Management Conference.

SANID, as the UAE program is called, combines the CERT program with the Swedish Civil Defense League concept. All participants undergo basic CERT training, and then may choose an area of specialization such as first aid, fire brigade, communications, or disaster psychology, paralleling the Swedish program model.

The relationship between SANID and the Dearborn CERT program continued as a small-scale effort until December 2013, when 13 SANID members came to Michigan to receive CERT training from CERT leaders from across Michigan. Dearborn CERT members were able to take part as well, combining the weeklong training program with Dearborn's monthly CERT team meeting for a joint Dearborn-UAE training session.



SANID members at the training in Dearborn, MI

During their visit, the UAE guests received instruction on tailoring the program for the approximately 4,000 SANID volunteers back home in Abu Dhabi. “They are train-the-trainer certified for the Michigan Advanced CERT curriculum, and they can take it and

adjust it and make it their own in [the] United Arab Emirates,” Smith said.

Because the training was conducted in English, there were occasional language barriers that required a translator and other workarounds. Smith, for instance, would often use pictures to depict specific terms. “It was a huge team effort to take something from the United States and make it theirs,” Smith noted.



SANID members present a token of appreciation to Dearborn Mayor Jack O'Reilly and Brad Smith

To date, SANID volunteers have assisted with disaster response around the world, including response operations in Saudi Arabia, Haiti, and the United States in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. “In the four years that they’ve been up and running, they’ve really trained and exercised, and they’ve been able to deploy worldwide—they’ve come to our nation and assisted,” Smith said. “There [have] been other international trainings of CERT, I just don’t think anybody’s actually adopted and run with it as much as the United Arab Emirates has in Abu Dhabi.”

The experience of partnering with another program has had a lasting impact on the Dearborn program as well, and Smith speaks highly of the value of partnerships, both international and domestic, noting that Dearborn CERT trains monthly and regularly welcomes guests from other

communities across Michigan. Smith's advice for other CERTs exploring the idea of partnerships:

“Embrace it. Wholeheartedly embrace it. If another nation or another jurisdiction wants to train with you or work with you, it spiritually [and] emotionally fills you up.”