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Integrating EMS and Public Health in Collegiate Disaster Response: CERT and SORT at the University of South Florida

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The University of South Florida (USF) hosts two complementary student-led programs that integrate emergency medical response and public health preparedness within a collegiate setting: the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) and the Student Outbreak Response Team (SORT). Initially established in 2013, USF CERT operates under the Hillsborough County Office of Emergency Management which is responsible for activating the team during emergencies². CERT focuses on teaching disaster management and immediate emergency response to students, faculty, and staff. SORT was developed in 2014 in response to a gap in outbreak-focused and environmental health-related training within emergency response systems. Emory University's SORT team inspired the formation of USF's own program². Since these programs function within a college campus where public health and emergency medicine is studied, engagement and impact remains high. While CERT and SORT maintain distinct operational missions, their collaboration allows for a coordinated response that strengthens both emergency response and public health preparedness across campus and the surrounding community when faced with disaster.

To become a CERT volunteer, individuals are required to complete the FEMA-aligned CERT Basic Training curriculum totaling 24 hours over the span of three days. To date, around 780 individuals have completed this training, with over 80 volunteers trained each year². This curriculum includes emergency preparedness, the Incident Command System (ICS), disaster psychology, search and rescue, and emergency medical operations. Medical skills include triage, airway positioning, bleeding control, tourniquet application, shock recognition, and hands-only cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). In accordance with Hillsborough County, CERT membership is structured into three tiers based on training and background check status, and this determines the scope of activities allowed during activations. Members with advanced certifications, such as EMTs, nurses, or amateur radio operators can be assigned specialized roles. Prior to deployment in an activation, many of these responders receive Just-in-Time Training, where instruction is relative to the exact situation they are in.

Large-scale hurricanes yield numerous hazards that require emergency response, and CERT plays a significant role. During Hurricane Irma in 2017, approximately 200 CERT-trained volunteers were deployed to support county emergency operations, including staffing a special needs shelter on USF's campus that served around 780 individuals. CERT members assisted with triage, patient monitoring, logistical support, and coordination with the county health department. Similar medical and sheltering needs were necessary during Hurricane Ian in 2022, and again during Hurricanes Helene and Milton in 2024. According to USF Health News, during the Helene and Milton response period, more than 123 USF volunteers contributed over 1,300 hours of service through CERT, supporting emergency operations center activities, shelter coordination, damage assessments, and post-storm recovery efforts in collaboration with county agencies and nonprofit partners¹. These disasters reinforced CERT's effectiveness in medical and operational response. However, there were still challenges in water testing across a large span of affected communities. While CERT was increasingly efficient with medical and logistical needs, the absence of individuals trained on environmental health and public health disasters created an opportunity to incorporate environmental and public health knowledge into disaster response.

SORT complements CERT by preparing volunteers to respond to disasters from a public health perspective, emphasizing outbreak investigation, environmental health assessment, water testing, and food safety. During the COVID-19 pandemic, SORT deployed more than 200 individuals to aid with contact tracing, vaccination sites, and management of data entry and traffic control within local and state health departments. These deployments reinforced the need for a trained public health response team. SORT has since expanded its training to accommodate field epidemiology and environmental health response that aligns with local and state health departments.

Between both programs, CERT and SORT maintain approximately 85 consistent members and 15 officers. Meetings usually involve 15 to 25 participants, trainings engage 30 to 45 individuals, and large-scale exercises include 65 to 80 participants². Many volunteers participate in both programs to gain comprehensive training and enhance coordinated response.

Samantha Sadorf, EMT-B, is a senior pre-medical student at the University of Florida majoring in Applied Physiology and Kinesiology, set to graduate in Spring 2026. She has presented research at NCEMSF, receiving the 2024–2025 Collegiate EMS Research Poster of the Year Award, and is continuing this research in collegiate EMS. She is also involved with the Journal of Collegiate Emergency Medical Services (JCEMS), contributing to outreach initiatives and manuscript development.

CERT holds two to three medical-oriented training sessions per month, and SORT offers one public health-focused training monthly alongside a monthly newsletter through social media. Many CERT members are also involved in the University Emergency Medicine Student Association (UEMSA) and the USF Medical Response Unit (MRU) where they hold additional emergency medicine-related certifications. As a result, CERT and SORT work closely with USF's other emergency medicine organizations to further supplement campus medical response capacity.

Outside of campus, CERT and SORT contribute to regional preparedness on a larger scale. They closely collaborate with local and state health departments, whose representatives often participate in trainings and deliver guest lectures on applied emergency management and public health preparedness. CERT and SORT members also serve as patient actors during mass casualty incidents hosted by Tampa International Airport, further involving themselves with regional emergency preparedness efforts. Additionally, they coordinate biannual large-scale post-hurricane response exercises with 45 partner agencies. These biannual trainings provide hands-on experience in coordinated disaster response, and have also created opportunities for qualitative research. Both programs receive financial support from USF and Hillsborough County.

Although they maintain distinct operational focuses, USF's CERT and SORT continue to work as a team to tackle future outbreak and disaster response. These programs strengthen community resilience through ongoing education, training, and engagement. This manuscript was developed using information obtained through interviews with program leadership and an article from USF Health News¹.

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