

Nursing Students Learn Disaster Response Skills

Connie Diaz Swearingen
Sherrie Rubio Wallace



Health promotion/community health clinical faculty at University of Wyoming School of Nursing recently incorporated disaster planning and emergency response into the range of student experiences during the clinical rotation. Through use of the established CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) Training as a platform for teaching nursing disaster response competencies, students developed skills in community disaster response and an increased awareness of the role of nurses in a emergency preparedness.

Following a major disaster, the established emergency response system may be overwhelmed in a matter of minutes to hours. Residents will need to rely on each other to meet immediate health and safety needs. CERT Training, developed by the Los Angeles City Fire Department, trains citizens and private and government employees to safely respond to disasters and help themselves, their family, and their neighbors. CERT Training prepares individuals to provide immediate assistance to victims, including light extrication and first aid, to organize spontaneous volunteers to assist in response and recovery, and to meet

immediate life-saving and life-sustaining needs until emergency services are available.

The February 2005 CERT class represented a unique campus-community collaboration that included participation from the School of Nursing, Laramie County Emergency Management and Fire Districts, Cheyenne Fire and Rescue Department, the Fire Safety Division of the Wyoming Air Guard, and the Cheyenne/Laramie County Health Department. Class participants included student nurses, public health employees and community members; instructors were professional and volunteer first responders. CERT instructors provided eight units during sixteen hours of classroom in-

struction. A mock disaster served as the culminating event of the CERT training. The practical experience was held at the Cheyenne Fire Training facility, and students had an opportunity to get hands-on experience in extinguishing fires, using cribbing for light extrication, scene assessment, damage control, triage, and first aid.

Following the completion of CERT training, School of Nursing faculty provided an overview of emergency response competencies for nurses and led a discussion on emergency planning and response for special populations. Students were encouraged to identify their own specific response roles in current and future employment settings.

The American Nurses Association, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, the Nursing Quad Council, and other professional organizations have identified the importance of emergency planning and disaster response competencies for nurses. Nurses have long been looked to as leaders and community resources in times of disaster. The addition of specific emergency preparedness and disaster response content to the nursing curriculum is one attempt to better prepare our future nursing workforce to fulfill that role.

Student response to the experience was positive. Our goals for the student nurses were to raise awareness of emergency planning and disaster response functions, to develop skill in preparing and protecting selves and families during times of disaster, and to learn community responder skills for assisting during disaster response and recovery. Student evaluations were positive, with students most enthusiastic about the hands-on learning that occurred. All participants recommended that CERT skill training be included for future classes. ■

For more information on the CERT Program, refer to: <http://ltraining.fema.gov/EMIWeb/CERT/>.

Connie Diaz Swearingen, MS, APRN, BC, is a former local public health nursing director and is currently an assistant lecturer; Sherrie Rubio Wallace, MS, RN, FNP-C, is an assistant lecturer. Both are at the Fay W. Whitney School of Nursing, university of Wyoming.

CERT Training Topics

1. Disaster Preparedness and Planning
2. Fire Safety
3. Disaster Medical Operations and Triage
4. First Aid
5. Light Search and Rescue Operations
6. Emergency Medical Response System and CERT
7. Disaster Psychology
8. Terrorism and CERT