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Smart Practices Spotlight

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Latest Spotlight: AWARE Academy: Anchorage Watchful, Alert, and Ready for Emergencies

City of Anchorage, Alaska

***Summary:** New “awareness” of homeland security risks prompts Anchorage Mayor George Wuerch to develop a program of community education and disaster preparedness for residents of his city. Now a model program for other communities in the state, the Mayor’s AWARE Academy creates opportunities for citizens to become more involved in local disaster preparedness.*

When the City of Anchorage surveyed residents after September 11, officials learned that their citizens wanted to play a more active role in helping the community prepare for disasters. In response, the city launched the AWARE Academy, an Anchorage-specific curriculum that shows residents how to prepare themselves, their families and their neighbors for emergencies and disasters.

“Citizens need to know that they have an important role to play in any emergency,” said Anchorage Mayor George Wuerch. “Through the AWARE Academy, we can teach our residents basic emergency response strategies in just one afternoon.” The Anchorage Watchful, Alert, and Ready for Emergencies (AWARE) Academy is a free, four-hour course that teaches Anchorage residents what to do in an emergency. The lessons are designed for citizens with little or no background in emergency response and are based on FEMA’s Community Emergency Response Team program, which trains citizens to be better prepared for emergency situations in their communities.

Through the use of borrowed equipment, donated classroom time and volunteer instructors, AWARE Academy students are taught the importance of a personal disaster strategy that includes a family communications plan, identifying a meeting place away from the disaster area and stocking disaster supply kits for each member of the family. To date, more than 1,100 Anchorage residents have graduated from the AWARE Academy; the city has conducted more than 30 classes in just four months at a cost of less than \$5,000. The curriculum is available on CD-ROM.

The city is using AWARE’s success as a foundation upon which to build its Citizen Corps initiative and its AWARE graduates are helping to build a strong Citizen Corps program. “Localities would be surprised at the response they would get,” said Heather Handyside, the city’s director of community relations. “It’s a very easy and cheap program to implement. The hardest thing to plan for is the success of the program.”

Thinking Locally:

How can you implement your own community-based public safety effort?
Are there resources you can utilize to create a program like this in your area?

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Smart Practices Spotlight highlights practices and ideas that members of the emergency management and responder community have found useful and effective; they are not necessarily advocated or endorsed by FEMA. For more information about the AWARE Academy, or for a CD-ROM containing AWARE curriculum materials, contact Heather Handyside at (907) 343-6114 or handysidehm@ci.anchorage.ak.us.

“My goal is to make Anchorage the safest, best prepared city in the nation,” said Mayor Wuerch, adding that the AWARE Academy is just the beginning of a comprehensive, community-based public safety effort.