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Teen first responders ready for the call

Written by PNJ staff writer: Louis Cooper • lcooper@pnj.com • April 10, 2008

The next time an emergency strikes Northwest Florida, there is a band of local teenagers ready to respond.

Santa Rosa County's 4-H program has trained and graduated the first Teen Community Emergency Response Team — or Teen CERT — in Florida, with the hope of spreading the program to 4-H chapters across the state.

"It's a very different program from a first-aid class," said Jaimie Hudson, a Pace mom who led the 4-H effort. "It revolves around the idea of a few responders for a large number of victims."

The program recently graduated 11 youths and will continue to recruit members. It includes 24 hours of training in disaster preparedness, search and rescue, and terrorism response.

Hudson said the teens will serve as backup responders. For instance, if a child goes missing in the woods, the teens might come in when regular search and rescue personnel need a rest.

Jenna Peoples, 15, said she joined Teen CERT because she wants to help people.

"There was a kid out here in Holt who got lost. He was autistic," Jenna said. "I'd like to be able to help people in situations like that."

Daniel Hahn, Santa Rosa County's emergency management plans chief, coordinated the



Jaimie Hudson/Special to the News Journal

Parker Hudson, a member of the new Teen Community Emergency Response Team, gives medical assistance to volunteer JoLynn Peoples during a recent mock disaster drill.

Teen CERT training.

"They got the exact same training adults do," Hahn said. "It's not toned down."

The only difference between a Teen CERT member and an adult CERT member: "There will be adult supervision in everything the 4-H club does with the county."

Hudson said she hopes 4-H clubs across the state develop Teen CERT programs. Hahn said Pace High School will begin its own Teen CERT program when the new school year begins next fall.