

Mobile App Tracks Emergency Volunteers

Brian Heaton | November 20, 2013



Community emergency response teams (CERT) have a new mobile app at their disposal to help track the locations of fellow volunteers and key points of interest during a deployment.

Called Deploy Pro, the app uses a GPS-based interactive map to display the positions of team members using color-coded pins. In addition, the program contains a triage victim counter and CERT reference guide for use in the field.

The program's design is based off the [Rowlett CERT app](#) created by Mike Ross, president of 91 Media, in Rockwall, Texas. Ross put together the original app specifically for Rowlett CERT members in May. But Deploy Pro will be usable by all CERT teams in the U.S. Ross said it should be available early next month.

Ross is also operations manager for EastTex CERT, which operates regionally under the umbrella of Rowlett CERT. He explained that the idea for the app spawned from an incident in April 2012 where he and his team were routed to an incorrect staging area when responding to a tornado strike.

A place that should have taken 10 minutes to find, took more than an hour because EastTex CERT received bad information. In addition, when the team finally arrived,

the local fire chief didn't know what he wanted the volunteers to do, resulting in more confusion.

"It was basically a giant mess and I quickly realized communication really needs to be improved," Ross said.

Development

The main feature of the Deploy Pro app is the map. Team leaders can color coordinate volunteers in different groups, and you can visually see each team and where they are in almost real time. The map updates user positions approximately every two minutes.

Users can write and set notes for particular locations that other app users can see. For example, if a search team finds a victim, they can drop a waypoint on the map so the incident commander and other team members can read the details and make further decisions.

While the map function is dependent on cellular service to stay online, all the other functions of the app, including the reference guide, which contains data on first aid, fire suppression and hazmat placards will remain active even if a user's device is offline.

The Deploy Pro app will replace the Rowlett CERT app once it launches. The new app was slated for release earlier this fall, but development issues pushed it backed a bit. Ross explained that while coding an app for iPhones is straightforward, doing the same for Android is a much more difficult process because of the various different brands of phones and software.

The primary bug Ross encountered was a communication problem between the iPhone and Android. If someone dropped a waypoint on an iPhone, folks on Androids couldn't always see it. Those issues were worked out earlier this month, however, and Ross is now putting together the final details to release the app.

Price is one of those details. While the Rowlett CERT app was free, Deploy Pro will cost \$9.99 per download and a \$2.99 per year usage fee. Ross said that while he wanted to market the app initially to CERT groups to purchase as a whole, the organizations don't have a lot of operating capital, so it'll be up to individual volunteers to purchase the app for themselves.

While that may make fiscal sense, it does potentially set up a confusing situation if some CERT members are using the app while others aren't. For example, if an incident commander is using the app and half of one particular team is not using the app, they wouldn't appear on the Deploy Pro map. Those members also wouldn't have access to the tools and reference materials the app provides.

Ross didn't feel that was a big issue, however, calling Deploy Pro "just another tool." He added that if not all members have the app, it'll be up to the team leader to count on people that do to share information.

While the first version of Deploy Pro isn't out yet, Ross has a number of upgrades in the works for future iterations of the app. He plans to add phone communication through the

app, a voice recorder and the ability to post photos taken with the camera's phone into waypoints on the interactive map.

Other Uses

Deploy Pro is aimed at CERT organizations, but any group or individual can download the app and put its mapping feature to use. Ross felt one of the key upcoming features he's developing is a team building function so each CERT or group can set itself up as an organization within the app.

Although it'll be awhile before that upgrade is ready, the change is necessary because when the app is first released, all users will have access to every colored pin set on the app throughout the country.

For example, if a user in Texas zooms all the way out on the app's map, he or she can see other users and the waypoints they've set in other states. That'll be fixed in the next version of the app, but for now in order to avoid confusion, Deploy Pro defaults the map to a five-mile radius around a person's location.

Ross felt that in addition to helping save lives, the app will also assist CERT members in navigating unfamiliar areas and working together as a unit. He said one Michigan CERT leader recalled an embarrassing incident when two of his members got lost when watching for fires in a remote area on July 4. The community's fire chief had to use firemen to go find the missing CERT personnel.

"If they had been using the app, they'd never get lost," Ross said. "You could just set a waypoint where the command center is ... and all they need to do is open the app, see the waypoint and walk toward it."

<http://www.govtech.com/public-safety/Mobile-App-Tracks-Emergency-Volunteers.html>