
For Immediate Release

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IN RECOGNITION OF IMMIGRANT HERITAGE WEEK, NYC EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT RECOGNIZES COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM (CERT) VOLUNTEERS ASSISTING NEW YORKERS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Immigrant Heritage Week runs April 13 through April 19

April 19, 2020 — As we conclude Immigrant Heritage Week, April 13 through April 19, New York City Emergency Management recognizes the contributions of its Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) volunteers by highlighting two volunteers who are supporting immigrant communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Started in New York City 2003, the NYC CERT program comprises 1,200 volunteers who assist the 8.6 million residents who call New York City home, of which 3.1 million are immigrants who speak over 200 languages.

For Grisel Amador, 57, director of the United Senior Center in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, the early social distancing guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19 meant that many of the center's Latino and Asian members were suddenly isolated.

When the center closed its doors, Grisel, as the Brooklyn United Center Team chief CERT volunteer and the center's director, looked out for her clients. She convened her staff and volunteers, and coordinated wellness calls to the now homebound seniors. Her team also collaborated with the Department for the Aging (DFTA) to ensure each member received food.

"Our members come to the center to learn new skills, socialize, enjoy meals and participate in sessions where they learn how to prepare for emergencies like hurricanes, storms, and heat waves," **Grisel, who has lived and worked in Sunset Park since she emigrated from Puerto Rico in 1981, said.** "Now we are also making sure that the isolation does not lead to depression, since we are no longer able to meet at the center."

Grisel added that her team connects members experiencing emotional distress to mental health experts for support.

Prior to the social distancing guidelines, Bassabi Bonfoh, 45, of the Bronx, volunteered at the Community Kitchen in Harlem. He served food and was part of the cleaning team providing services to vulnerable New Yorkers. As soup kitchens and food banks closed under the new guidelines, Bassabi, an immigrant from Togo, West Africa, continued to volunteer in other locations. He is the district leader of Manhattan District 9.

His latest volunteering assignment is with the Pelham Fritz Recreation Center. The center is one of nine food distribution locations where New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC) registered drivers pick up food orders to deliver to vulnerable New Yorkers.

Volunteer work can range from shipping and handling to data entry or food distribution, depending on the daily needs. There are currently nine shifts per day at each food distribution center.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic social distance guidance began, CERT has deployed 126 volunteers who have collectively worked 654 hours. CERT volunteers are assisting across multiple City agencies with food distribution programs.

“The best part about volunteering is that it keeps you fit, it keeps your body moving,” **Bassabi** added. “Volunteering also pays your heart and soul, because making people happy is the best part of being a volunteer. Plus without volunteers, who will help the nation?”

Immigrant Heritage Week was started in 2004 to honor the legacy of April 17, 1907, the day in NYC history that the largest number of immigrants – 11,000, entered the U.S. through Ellis Island. Contributions by Immigrants have always been a part of New York City’s history and have enriched it with their culture, languages, traditions, innovation and food.

“Our immigrant volunteers lend us their unique cultural and language expertise when they join CERT which is crucial for us, since it allows us to be better connected to communities that are generally hard to reach,” said **Iskra Killgore, director of community engagement and language access with NYC Emergency Management**. “As we celebrate Immigrant Heritage Week this year, we are also celebrating the contributions immigrant New Yorkers have made to fighting COVID-19 as they are on the front lines in hospitals, grocery stores, and as volunteers keeping the essential parts of the city working.”

Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) in New York City

The New York City Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program started in 2003 with 106 volunteers. Today there are more than 1,200 credentialed CERT volunteers representing throughout New York City. NYC CERT volunteers participate in a 10-session basic training program where they receive instruction from active members of the NYPD, FDNY and NYC Emergency Management. Volunteers are trained in disaster preparedness and basic emergency response skills, including fire safety, light search and rescue, disaster medical operations, and traffic management. After completing basic training, new members join local CERTs to support their communities by assisting City agencies that prepare for and respond to emergencies.

For more information about the CERT program, or if you are interested in becoming a CERT volunteer, call 311 or visit NYC.gov/CERT.

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