

Community Testimony in Support of SF 983
Community Engagement Response Team appropriation
Senate Judiciary and Public Safety Committee

Testimony from Tawonda Burks, Rochester resident

The Community Engagement Response Team (CERT) in Rochester has been an invaluable resource for the Black community, providing unwavering support in various forms. I have witnessed firsthand how CERT has mediated conflicts, de-escalated tense situations, provided nourishment, distributed educational resources, administered life-saving first aid, and even saved lives through Narcan. CERT has also actively engaged with local schools, downtown areas, subways, and skyways, offering assistance to the homeless, among many other vital services.

I fully support CERT and the essential work they do. Their services complement local law enforcement and are an undeniable asset to our community. CERT plays a crucial role in bridging the divide between law enforcement and the Black community.

I urge you to support this bill by investing in CERT and the broader community. We all deserve to live in a safe and supportive environment, and CERT has been instrumental in creating that reality.

Sincerely,
T. Burks and Family
507-990-7223

Testimony from Leonnel Lewis, Rochester resident

To whom it may concern, my name is Leonnel Lewis, I would like to share with you the impact that CERT has made in my life and my family's life. I am a single grandmother who care for two children, one with mental health disability, and the other one with a disability. CERT has been a second parent for me in my home. Most of all supporting my children that's with me. They have mentorship with my 16-year-old grandson and taking him to church to teach him the values of life. They also teach him the value of getting a job, learning how to drive a car, things I don't have time for, it because I am a single grandparent, trying to make sure to keep roof over our head and CERT play a valuable role. The community is not always a safe place for kids today. CERT has made sure that that is not an issue in the community that I live in. CERT has always showed up in crisis situation as a support system regardless if it's for food ,clothing or just a support for my family. The families in our community look for the help and the support from this program and it's important for it to remain in our community. Thank you.

Testimony from Laneice Bryant, Rochester resident

The way CERT made an impact they were very supportive when my son Todd Banks was murdered. They had lots of activities in the downtown Rochester area like free hair cuts, basketball, music dancing, chess, food, etc. Most importantly they walked through downtown made sure there was no violence. They are very active with our youth and that is how CERT made a difference. Thank you.

Testimony from Sananda McCall, Rochester resident

I am writing to express my strong support for the Community Engagement Response Team (CERT) and the critical role they play in Rochester. Through my experiences attending CERT events, I have witnessed firsthand how they foster genuine community engagement and build bridges where trust has been broken.

One of the most powerful aspects of CERT's work is the open, honest conversations they facilitate with individuals who may not trust law enforcement or who feel misunderstood. I have personally listened to vulnerable stories—experiences that these individuals would not feel comfortable sharing in other settings. CERT creates a safe space where people feel seen and heard, allowing their concerns to be acknowledged rather than dismissed. This kind of dialogue is essential not only for community healing but also for helping law enforcement better understand and serve the people they are sworn to protect.

Although I am not officially affiliated with CERT, I have had the privilege of attending events where I saw the impact of their work up close. The CERT volunteers are not outsiders; they are individuals with lived experiences who know how to connect with different parts of the community in ways that truly resonate. Their presence makes a difference, and their work is needed now more than ever.

I urge you to support the bill that will allow CERT to continue and expand its vital mission. Their impact extends far beyond any single event—it strengthens the fabric of our community, one conversation at a time.

Sincerely,

Sananda McCall

Testimony from Orion Thurston Sr., Rochester resident and Principal at John Marshall High School, Rochester Public Schools

To Whom May Concern,

This is Orion Thurston Sr., one of the Principals at John Marshall High School. I'm writing this letter on behalf of the JM Administrator Team. I'm going on my 7th year here at JM. The CERT Program has been very instrumental to our building in many different ways. They bring life, culture, relationship building, community and most of all, Love to ALL OUR KIDS. I can honestly say the building culture at JM has gone in a positive direction and we wish to continue our partnership with CERT. It would be an honor if you come to JM and see for yourself in person. We are always available.

Thank you,

Orion Thurston Sr.

Testimony from Mohamed Farah, Community Outreach Specialist at Olmsted County

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Mohamed Farah, and I am a Community Outreach Specialist with Olmsted County, as well as a Crisis Co-Responder with law enforcement (RPD, OCSO). I am reaching out to express my strong support for the Community Engagement Response Team (CERT) in Rochester, MN. CERT's unwavering commitment to creating safer, more inclusive neighborhoods through proactive engagement and support has made a significant and transformative impact on our community since its launch.

In my role, I have had the privilege of working directly with and witnessing firsthand the dedication and compassion of CERT team members as they collaborate with law enforcement and assist community members in need. Their efforts not only provide critical assistance to individuals, including mediation and de-escalation, but also foster trust and understanding between community members and service providers in our city. CERT's approach addresses concerns before they escalate, ensuring that individuals receive the necessary care and resources in a timely and compassionate manner.

I firmly believe that continued investment in CERT is essential to the well-being and success of our community as a whole. I strongly urge the Minnesota Senate to pass the proposed bill that will enable CERT to expand its services and continue supporting underserved individuals, filling vital gaps, and fostering a stronger, more connected community. The funding provided by this bill will allow CERT to reach even more individuals and make a lasting impact in our neighborhoods.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to all the advocates, supporters, and the Minnesota Senate for their unwavering commitment to the CERT initiative. I greatly support this critical effort and deeply appreciate the work being done to ensure that CERT has the resources necessary to continue its vital robust work in our community.

I fully support the positive change and lasting impact the CERT Team has already made in Rochester. I am confident that with the passage of this bill, CERT will continue to make a meaningful difference. The leadership team's vision for positive change is crucial to many families in our community, and their efforts to create safer, more inclusive neighborhoods are invaluable.

Thank you again for your dedication to this important cause. Your advocacy ensures that CERT can continue its essential work for the people of Rochester.

"Focus on one change at a time to reach and positively impact more community members over time."

Best regards,
Mohamed Farah
Olmsted County Community Outreach Specialist
Crisis Responder w/ Law Enforcement
(507) 513-3734

Testimony from Sara-Louise Henry, Coordinator of Youth Empowerment, Rochester Public Schools

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to express my strong support for the Community Engagement Response Team (CERT) and the vital work they do in fostering meaningful connections, promoting public safety, and strengthening community relationships. CERT plays a crucial role in bridging gaps between community members, organizations, and public institutions, ensuring that the voices of all individuals are heard and valued.

Through their proactive engagement, crisis response, and commitment to equity and inclusion, CERT has demonstrated a profound impact on our community. Their efforts in de-escalation, resource coordination, and advocacy create a safer and more connected environment for everyone. I wholeheartedly support their mission and encourage continued investment in their work to further their reach and effectiveness.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need any further information.

Sincerely,

Sara-Louise Henry

Testimony from April Sutor, Rochester resident

Dear Legislators,

I'm a resident of Rochester who has worked with CERT in a number of capacities over the years. CERT has become a respected and sought out entity as peace builders across ethnic, racial and income groups in the Rochester community.

CERT works in consort with law enforcement, community groups, businesses, and residents.

Many CERT members volunteer long hours for the betterment of our community keeping events safe, providing support and assistance to residents and businesses.

The partnerships CERT forged across racial, ethnic, business and government lines is outstanding as they promote cooperation, peace building, understanding, and safety.

They engender hope and trust among people. I urge your support of the bill before you.

Respectfully,

April Sutor, MPA
Rochester, MN
507-280-9889

Testimony from Phillip Thomas, Rochester resident

To Whom It May Concern,

I hold myself to a high standard within the Rochester community. As a Black real estate professional, I believe my presence alone has a meaningful impact on the Black community by effectively embodying and reflecting this role with integrity.

When individuals see someone who looks like them, speaks like them, and has shared similar experiences, it fosters a sense of approachability, relatability, and understanding. One of the key challenges in our community is bridging the gap between youth and law enforcement. Social skills and trauma awareness, especially concerning interactions with law enforcement are often overlooked, and the consequences of this oversight are evident daily. When dedicated individuals focus on addressing these issues, real change happens and I have witnessed it firsthand.

This is why I deeply support CERT. I have seen CERT members in action - deescalating conflicts, serving as voices of reason, and actively engaging with the community. Their commitment to acting rather than standing by while systemic issues persist is commendable, and I stand behind CERT's presence 100%.

All the best,
Phillip Thomas
507-269-8489

Testimony from Ramona Norwood, Rochester resident

To Whom This May Concern:

The Community Engagement Response Team (CERT) is a valuable organization that has provided ongoing safety and collaboration within our community.

It's imperative to continue to support this organization. As a retired former employee at Rochester Public Schools I know the positive impact this organization has provided to our students, parents and families. This team is hardworking and dedicated citizens in protecting all citizens in the Rochester community.

Thank you,
Ramona Norwood, M.Ed

Testimony from Cecil Bellephant, Rochester resident

My name is Cecil Bellephant. I have been associated with C.E.R.T. for about four years now.

The way C.E.R.T. has been able to bring a sense of unity between the police department the community of Rochester especially the black community. The mayor of Rochester, the city Council, the NAACP the entity of Mayo Clinic, Rochester, and etc. has been nothing short of a miracle!

I've seen firsthand the impact that C.E.R.T. has had on the relationship between the police department and the black community of Rochester. C.E.R.T. is much needed here in this area and beyond I want to validate the importance of having C.E.R.T. insert continuing to have influence in the Rochester area and beyond

Search is also instrumental and encouraging our community and fostering a filling of unity and safety amongst the people of Rochester.

If you would like to talk to me further concerning C.E.R.T. and it's importance, to our community please do not hesitate to reach out to me personally.

Gratefully!

Cecil Bellephant

507-564-2066

Testimony from Virge and Jackie Trotter, Rochester residents

CERT, has recruited, trained and maintained a committed group of community volunteers.

These Rochester residents give their time to contribute to an atmosphere of positive interactions between other Rochester residents who might never get to know each other. These volunteers are present in situations that need their commitment and interpersonal skills to help others to be the better versions of themselves in sometimes uncomfortable, awkward situations which could negatively impact the peace and good will of the community.

These skilled volunteers work to bring goodwill, joy and respect to potentially negative situations. As taxpayers, we see the work they do as getting a high return on investment. We acknowledge and appreciate their contributions to building a community we all feel respected and valued in.

Vote yes to support their work,

Virge & Jackie Trotter

60 yr residents of Rochester, MN

Testimony from Julie Herrera-Lemler, Rochester resident

I am proud to support the Community Engagement Response Team (CERT) in Rochester. This initiative is vital for strengthening relationships between the Black community, law enforcement, and the broader BIPOC population while promoting public safety, advocacy, and opportunity.

The appropriation for fiscal year 2026 will empower community leaders and volunteers to serve as liaisons, mediate issues, and uplift underrepresented voices. CERT is a crucial step toward building trust, fostering collaboration, and ensuring a safer, more inclusive community.

CERT has served so many people in our community! When I see them at events or around town – I feel at ease and safe. Knowing that they are there as trusted allies to my BIPOC community and active peacemakers, makes a world of difference to so many in Rochester, MN. I strongly urge your support for this initiative.

Sincerely,
Julie Herrera-Lemler

Advocate and active member of the Rochester, MN Latino Community

Testimony from William Bell, Rochester resident

To Who It May Concern:

My name is William Bell. For the last few years I have been noticing the group CERT around the community. It is a very uplifting thing to see the interaction with the younger youth they have done around Rochester Minnesota as in some of the members being downtown after bar closes to show presence to the young adults and guiding them on if you're going to have fun with the correct way and be responsible about it I have seen them go door to door in the neighborhood and helping with groceries and helping elderly people in the community with that presence being noticed and seen in the community I think it reaches out to the younger group to show them role model leadership integrity and all the above things that we need to be decent human beings.

Testimony from Kia Pearson, Rochester resident

The Community Engagement Response Team plays a crucial role in fostering strong connections within the community by addressing concerns, providing support, and ensuring a safe and inclusive environment. Their efforts help to build trust, promote communication and safety, and create a sense of belonging for all members. I am so very proud to be apart of a community that is involved with this team. They have made a tremendous impact on our community and I fully support them to continue their admirable efforts!

Thank you,
Kia

Testimony from Connie Cohen, Rochester resident

I wanted to share how valuable CERT has been within our community. Having the presence of people who care about the well-being of the community is needed more than ever. CERT has had a positive impact on families and individuals. They've created a safe space for hard conversations to be had and also for the community to voice their concerns about issues that impact us as a people. We need to continue to support the good in this world so that change, while challenging at times can continue to be a catalyst for Growth , greater success, and better opportunities. I appreciate CERT and this community is a better place because of them.

Best Regards,
Connie C.

Testimony from Kiara Renfro, Rochester resident

Hello members of the Senate. I am writing you today, to express my gratitude for our wonderful organization whom many know as Cert.

I want to start out by saying, thank you to all of the selfless members of the community engagement response team. Thank you for all that you are and all that you do.

These beautiful people dedicate their time and efforts on a daily basis to positively effect the lives of others. It is through their selfless acts that we have the support that we need in the community.

I am so grateful that my life has been touched by these amazing people. They go out their way to make all feel welcomed, safe and cared for. They make people like me feel like we have a voice.

If it were not for cert I honestly don't know where my family would be. It is my hope that this wonderful organization will be around for many years to come.

Testimony from Brandi McCoy, Rochester resident

I am writing to express my strong support for the Community Engagement Response Team (CERT) in Rochester, MN, and to urge continued funding and legislative backing for this vital program. CERT is an essential frontline response initiative that addresses the growing needs of individuals experiencing homelessness, substance use disorders, mental health crises, and other social challenges in our community.

By providing direct engagement, crisis de-escalation, and coordinated access to local resources, CERT has reduced unnecessary emergency calls, eased the burden on law enforcement, and, most importantly, provided lifesaving support to individuals in need. The program's impact is evident in

the countless success stories of individuals who have transitioned from crisis to stability with the help of CERT's dedicated professionals.

Continued investment in CERT will allow the program to expand its services, increase outreach efforts, and ensure that more residents receive the critical support they need. I respectfully request your leadership in advocating for sustained and increased funding for this program, which is making a tangible difference in the lives of so many in Rochester.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I appreciate your dedication to policies that uplift and strengthen our communities, and I look forward to your support in ensuring the ongoing success of CERT.

Sincerely,
Brandi McCoy
5073128030

Testimony from Kenneth M. Rowe, Rochester resident, Sr-Founder and Senior Pastor, Christ's Church of the Jesus Hour

This community has been fortunate to have a group of individuals that have accepted the role of community advocates on behalf of people that are sometimes unable to speak clearly for themselves.

We are a prosperous and growing community, and we can't wait for the problem to develop before taking action against social issues and mutual respect, when we already have a proven track record in CERT.

We cannot afford to take one step backward. Please join us in continuing to move forward.

We can see the division and separation that's continuing to plague our nation, so we must counter it by caring for individuals, families and communities in a committed manner, together!

Let's build on what the leaders of CERT has already achieved!

Thank you.

Kenneth M. Rowe
507-254-8048

Testimony from De-Angilo Funches, Rochester resident

Cert has been instrumental in the community in more ways than one. From squashing petty street quarrels. To making the downtown entertainment SAFER for women to get home safely after a night out! Bringing over all peace and community together!

De'Angilo Funches

Testimony from Jimmy Barker, Rochester resident

The impact of C.E.R.T. in this community has been nothing short of remarkable, driving transformative change and yielding numerous benefits that have profoundly positively impacted the lives of community members.

By providing indispensable support within the court system, safeguarding the rights and dignity of individuals from diverse backgrounds, and offering a sense of solace and reassurance, C.E.R.T. has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the well-being and empowerment of this community.

Their presence has fostered a sense of unity and shared purpose, promoting a culture of inclusivity, respect, and understanding. Through their involvement in community events, provision of secondary support, and presence at school events and county fairs, C.E.R.T. has helped to build trust and foster a more harmonious relationship between law enforcement and the community.

As someone who has spent over 20 years in this community and has witnessed the complexities of the issues firsthand, I can confidently attest that C.E.R.T.'s impact has been life-changing, and their dedication to creating a better community for all is truly uplifting.

Sincerely,
Jimmy Barker

Testimony from Timothy Nela, Rochester resident

My name is Timothy A. Nela, and I have lived in this community for nearly 27 years. Throughout my time here, I have witnessed many changes and experiences. I wholeheartedly support the efforts of CERT in our community. When individuals dedicate their time and energy to make our community safer and more enjoyable for everyone, I truly commend them for their outstanding work.

Testimony from Amanda Howard, Rochester resident

Cert has been an amazing help to not just the community, but personally my family. Their workers put in so much of their time into saving lives and helping individuals that struggle with life issues and mental health. Their support is amazing whether it's a day or a few weeks. They work around the clock to keep our youth safe and helping them improve and learn how to navigate with the things they are dealing with in a positive way.

Any time I hear about a situation where a child is struggling with suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming themselves or others, they are the number 1 program that pops in my head to give as a resource. Honestly I don't think I know of a 2nd program here in Rochester that I'd recommend. The hours are amazing and they are always so ready, willing, and waiting to help out a family in need of their services. With cert in the community it leaves myself and I'm sure many other people and families at ease knowing they are here in the community to help keep children and families safe from self harm and harming others when they are going through the obstacles that arise in their lives.

Testimony from Olivia Bergen, Rochester resident

I am writing in support of legislation supporting the work of Rochester's Community Engagement Response Team (CERT). No matter our race, neighborhood, or income, we all deserve to live in safe communities. CERT's highly effective model of community leadership, deep relationships, and mentorship makes that more possible. Whether through their community patrols, activities for youth, or relationship-building with local police, their work is creating greater trust and safety for the BIPOC community but also Rochester at large.

It's both innovative and totally common sense at the same time. Our communities need an alternative approach to traditional policing and CERT is doing that--with very limited resources. CERT deserves more capacity to do the great work they do, and more communities deserve an organization like CERT.

This organization by and for community members has had a remarkable impact on Rochester's safety, connectedness, and shared respect and I enthusiastically support state resources supporting their work.

Thank you for your consideration,

Olivia Bergen

312 18 1/2 Ave SW, Rochester

Testimony from Tyresa Bush, Rochester resident

To whomever this may concern, the organization C.E.R.T is a very helpful and necessary solution to issues in our community. One of the most important things that's needed in Olmsted County is unity building. C.E.R.T exemplifies extraordinary unity building by engaging with our youth and offering the needed support that youth look for in the community as well as adult resources. I enjoyed seeing C.E.R.T helping out at the Olmsted county fair last year. C.E.R.T is an encouraging group and needs to be recognized for it. Thank you.

Tyresa Bush

Testimony from Karl D. Johnson, Community Relations Director at Cascade Creek Memory Care, Rochester**Support the CERT Initiative: A Common-Sense Step Toward Safer Communities**

Regardless of political affiliation, investing in relationship-driven, community-based response teams is a no-brainer. Groups like CERT (Community Engagement Response Team) mentor youth, build trust, and work hand-in-hand with schools, neighborhoods, and local organizations to create peace, reduce crime, and promote living within the law.

We need to shift the narrative—away from reaction and toward prevention. By supporting this bill, you're endorsing a proven model of engagement that strengthens our neighborhoods, uplifts our schools, and helps ensure every family lives in a community where safety and trust go hand in hand.

This is not partisan. This is people. Let's pass this bill and empower those already doing the work.

Karl D Johnson

Testimony from Devin Dudley, Rochester resident

To whom it may concern,

Writing regarding C.E.R.T. This program has helped so many young people in the community to find things to do outside of the households they live in. I have been a property manager in many different positions in the community and have seen first hand the change and the importance this program has made. Bud Whitehorn himself has been a huge impact on the community in Rochester.

Without this program hundreds of kids will go to school with no supplies, backpacks, the neighborhoods they work close with would suffer.

Rochester needs these programs for young kids to have mentors and without it I truly believe as a born and raised resident many small communities in Rochester will see an uptick in crime.

Thank you,
Devin Dudley
The Maven On Broadway,
507-990-8236

Testimony from Beth Thompson, Rochester resident

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to ask for continued funding and support for the CERT program. Much of police work is reactive and CERT has the ability to engage in the community proactively. I have seen the CERT team members interacting in the community and feel that they are a valuable part of the community services in Rochester. Please continue to fund this necessary service.

Thank you,
Beth Thompson, M.S.W., L.I.C.S.W.
Rochester, MN 55904

Testimony from Jessica E. Phillips, Rochester resident

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to express my wholehearted support for the Community Engagement Response Team (CERT) and to highlight the significant impact that CERT has had on our community. This dedicated team has demonstrated exceptional commitment to fostering community engagement, enhancing public safety, and providing vital support during times of crisis.

The impact of CERT's work extends beyond emergency response. Since 2021, their proactive approach to disaster preparedness has not only undoubtedly saved lives and minimized damage but also fostered a sense of camaraderie and collective responsibility among participants, other community members, and the local Rochester police force. I am personally aware of the personal sacrifice that the volunteer members of CERT has given in service to the organization and it's mission. In an era where most people tend to lean toward self-promoting activities, it is extremely rare to find an entire team of people who voluntarily give of their personal time toward the concern of others. This type of unwavering dedication to service and community improvement from CERT has garnered widespread appreciation and respect from all sectors of the community and should be enough reason to provide every resource to help them continue their efforts.

In conclusion, I am proud to support CERT and endorse their continued efforts to make our community safer, more resilient, and more connected. Their valuable contributions have had a profound and positive influence on our community, and I am confident that with ongoing support, CERT will continue to thrive and make an even greater impact in the future.

Sincerely,

Jessica E. Phillips