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Environmental Health Supports Emergency Response Training

By CDP Public Affairs

Emergency situations require quick response for the recovery and safety of those affected. Response methods aren't limited to extinguishing a fire, restoring power, or cleaning up hazardous materials. Underlying factors that may instantly affect a scene or will affect how emergency events unfold are often overlooked.

The Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP) in Anniston, Ala., recently partnered with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, to deliver the inaugural Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) Introductory Level course at the CDP. The partnership will play a large role in the development of future EHTER course offerings at the CDP, which will provide DHS funding for state, local, and tribal emergency responders.

According to the CDC, environmental health practitioners have important roles and perform critical functions during emergency response. Those functions include assessing shelters, testing drinking water, determining food safety, and controlling disease.

"Many factors in the environment can affect human health," said Rob Blake, chief of the Environmental Health Services Branch at the CDC. "All emergencies are local and all emergencies have an environmental component. This course increases readiness and ensures environmental health professionals are ready and have a certain level of awareness."

An additional benefit of the course is the unique insight it provides emergency response personnel. Pat Sullivan, a fire chief from Gulf Port, Miss., has been directly involved with several incidents that required a certain level of environmental knowledge to recover.

"Fire fighters normally worry about putting water on fires," said Sullivan. "Until a few years ago, we were never concerned that the water we're drinking or cooking with could be contaminated. Public health can help us plan on things we hadn't thought about, advise us about problems we're facing, and problems we may face in the next 12 hours. Then those events don't become another emergency—they become another part of the operation that needs to be addressed."

According to the CDC, there is no current national, comprehensive, standardized education and training program in emergency preparedness and response for environmental health specialists. The EHTER course moves the nation toward a uniform



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training program that will benefit health practitioners and emergency responders who are first on the scene.

“It’s shown me how we can interact with responders on scene and the support we can offer,” said Jim Mazurowski, director of environmental health for Livingston County, N.Y., and a 2007 graduate of the CDC’s Environmental Public Health Leadership Institute (EPHLI). “Many times, we’re cut out of the conversation during emergencies and this course discusses why we need to be cut in. It’s great training and gives a good picture of the environmental health role during emergency response. I see us as an asset to emergency responders first on the scene, to help understand issues and how the disaster may have affected infrastructure.”

“I’m more educated and able to ask the right questions,” added Sullivan. “Before this class, I might not have even thought about the question. You do yourself a disservice when you provide contaminated food and water to your own emergency personnel. Public Health is a tool that is underutilized. Incident commanders, fire personnel, law enforcement, and others in command roles need this course. They will understand that this is a tool that will help them do their job and make the incident go more smoothly.”

The EHTER course consists of three days that include presentations by environmental experts from around the U.S., including specialists from U.S. Public Health Service and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Future plans include conducting four pilot courses at the CDP over the next few months, before the course officially joins the CDP lineup. The CDC will oversee course delivery and continue to develop the class, in partnership with the CDP.

“Public health response is a vital component of national response capability,” commented CDP Superintendent Dr. Todd Jones. “In this multi-discipline field, environmental health professionals are an integral part of the overall know-how required to respond to natural or man-made incidents. Offering the EHTER course to state, local, and tribal environmental health resources through this innovative partnership between the CDP and CDC was simply the right thing to do. As we look to the future of this collaboration, our aim is to expand offerings that advance the professional competencies of environmental health emergency responders—and in doing so, increases the preparedness level of the nation as a whole.”

Blake added that the new collaboration between the two organizations is a perfect blend—especially in the current financial climate.



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“Travel and training budgets have been cut,” he said. “The CDP’s funding for state, local, and tribal responders allows them to receive excellent training and to prepare their communities. Although the course is primarily designed for the environmental health specialist, we’re hoping that over time, we can encourage a good mix of other disciplines to attend, so they become aware of the need and we can learn from them—and so that they learn from us.”

“This course will assist in the development of Alabama’s formal Environmental Health Response Plan,” commented the Alabama Department of Public Health Department’s Tim Hatch—a 2009 graduate of the CDC’s EPHLI. “I now have more information of what we need to include, so the baseline environmentalist has these skills. If an emergency happens—large scale or small scale—we’ll have a staff who can respond.”

Today’s disaster response may be slightly different from a few years ago. With the revision of the Incident Command System and the addition of the National Response Framework, responding to an emergency is no longer a subject pulled from a bookshelf. Responders and commanders must use a common-sense approach and decentralize authority in order to succeed. Public health must also be considered during every response and recovery operation.

The Center for Domestic Preparedness offers 39 courses, designed for all emergency response disciplines. CDP training features the latest techniques and procedures, as well as some of the best equipment available. CDP training for state, local and tribal responders is fully funded by FEMA, a component of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Round-trip air and ground transportation, lodging, and meals are provided at no cost to responders, their agency, or jurisdiction.

To learn more about the Center for Domestic Preparedness, visit <http://cdp.dhs.gov> or call 866-213-9553. For more information about the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, visit <http://www.cdc.gov>.

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