

Home field advantage



Local Emergency Planning Committees were originated back in 1986 as a way of increasing preparedness for hazmat accidents. That mission is now more important than ever.

This exercise last February in Okaloosa County, Fla., brought together police, fire and other emergency personnel from several counties, as well as personnel from Eglin AFB. A "hijacked" fuel barge collided with a CITGO dock, causing a leak of anhydrous ammonia and diesel fuel into Boggy Bayou. Here, sheriff's personnel in PPE gather forensic evidence. The Florida District 1 LEPC organized the entire exercise.

By John Ost

Shortly after American Airlines Flight 11 struck the World Trade Center, Roger Hatfield, the Nashua, N.H., assistant fire chief, immediately called the city's fire chief, the public health director, the police chief and the mayor and asked them for permission to activate the city's emergency response plan and mobilize their departments. They agreed.

Hatfield then contacted other key groups in the city, including public works, emergency medical teams, the local hospitals, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and some of the local schools, which are used as emergency shelters.

It was no coincidence that the officials Hatfield contacted throughout that day represent their agencies on Nashua's Local Emergency Planning Committee, where Hatfield is an emergency management co-director. (His counterpart is Sgt. Mike Jones, supervisor of the Nashua Police Department bomb squad.) In fact,

Nashua's emergency plan had been written by the LEPC.

SARA: The LEPCs' mother

LEPCs were first established in 1986 by the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act, and their original mission was to develop emergency plans for hazmat incidents. In addition, each LEPC was expected to develop a database of hazardous materials stored at facilities in the city, county or region for which the LEPC has jurisdiction.

Under SARA's right-to-know provisions, LEPC officers were then expected to provide the public with a complete accounting of hazardous materials found in the jurisdiction. At the same time, the LEPC was expected to develop hazmat training programs for first responders, while also educating local industries about proper storage and disposal of their hazardous materials.

How an LEPC is organized is determined by the state. In New York, the LEPCs are organized on the county level, while New Jersey has created an LEPC in each of its 587 municipalities

and 21 counties, says John Ulschoefer, chemical emergency preparedness coordinator for EPA Region II.

Though the initial SARA mandate didn't provide any funding for LEPCs, events like the first World Trade Center attack in February 1993 and the Murrah Building bombing in June 1995 exacerbated worries about the nation's readiness to deal with a serious hazmat event. In 1997, Congress passed the Nunn-Lugar-Domenici Domestic Preparedness Program to provide terrorism response training and equipment to selected cities, and money from this program found its way to LEPCs in many communities.

Networking in Nashua

As a director of the Nashua LEPC, Hatfield co-chairs a cross-section of first responders; community emergency response teams; healthcare providers; and local, regional and state officials. The Nashua LEPC's early membership, like that of most LEPCs around the country, was weighted heavily toward first responders and industry represen-

tatives concerned with chemical hazards in their companies.

The first order of business was assessing the chemical hazards in the community. When an EPA Region I office in Boston conducted a hazmat vulnerability study of the region in 1992, it showed that Nashua was at the top of the list of cities open to potential hazmat incidents. The report concerned local officials, and the LEPC intensified its hazmat training for first responders who would be inspecting local industries.

Like many other planning committees around the country, the Nashua LEPC began moving toward an all-hazards emergency response plan that would also include WMD. "Nashua built an all-hazards plan," says Hatfield. "We can plug any contaminant into the plan and the plan will work."

LEPC training began to include exercises to improve emergency response coordination. As a result, in Nashua and other communities, LEPC membership broadened well beyond first responders and industry. What differed from state to state was whether the LEPC would expand its emergency planning and training roles beyond its original SARA mandate, though most LEPC training began focusing on multi-agency training after 1995.

In Nashua, the LEPC took the lead in helping the city develop an all-hazards plan. As its emergency plan became more comprehensive, the Nashua LEPC's roster expanded to include the local Red Cross, the Salvation Army, local ambulance and emergency medical teams, hospital staff, public health workers, communications personnel and a wider range of private-sector members.

The LEPC exercises included interagency training and WMD scenarios. While the exercises helped identify some weaknesses, they also created a milieu where people could network across disciplines and learn to work together within the city and eventually with other towns on both sides of the New Hampshire–Massachusetts border. Regional response networks were further strengthened as police, fire, hazmat teams, hospitals and health providers implemented mutual aid agreements over the second half of the 1990s.

By Sept. 11, 2001, the Nashua LEPC

was ready to play a significant role in the city's emergency response to unexpected events like the anthrax attacks.

"After the attack on the World Trade Center, we began implementing our emergency plan for providing shelters and handling the influx of people and casualties if Boston was attacked," says Hatfield. (Nashua is only 35 miles from Boston.) "We also mobilized health-care providers, local hospital personnel and possible recovery teams to send to Boston."

Since Sept. 11, the Nashua LEPC has continued to enhance its terrorism and WMD training for emergency responders. It also plays a pivotal role in helping local officials decide how to disburse federal homeland security funds. In June, Nashua received a \$250,000 federal grant for robots for the bomb squad, and the city also received \$205,000 from the Department of Homeland Security as part of its fiscal '03 disbursement to the state. The city is expected to receive additional supplemental funds from DHS later this year.

A regional LEPC ...

Like the Nashua LEPC, the Mid-America Local Emergency Planning Committee was established in 1986 and remains faithful to the mandates outlined by SARA, though that's where the similari-

ties end, because the Mid-America LEPC was created as a regional group from the outset.

The LEPC serves about 4 million people in a five-county area in Missouri and Kansas. The committee's emergency plan must meet the needs of 75-80 cities that range from 500,000 people in Kansas City, Mo., to towns as small as 50 people.

In addition to having many industries that use hazardous materials, Kansas City is home to the country's second-largest rail center. And because Kansas City also sits at the crossroads of many interstate highways, the transportation of hazardous materials by rail and truck is a major concern throughout the region.

"Our major function early on was to ensure that we had the preparation and planning necessary to respond to hazardous material incidents, whether at a fixed facility or while it was transported," says Chief Richard "Smokey" Dyer of the Kansas City (Mo.) Fire Department. "Even though there was a major emphasis on the public's right to know in 1986, it was always my opinion that it would not help the public to know about these materials if we did not also have a plan in place to handle problems and mitigate an incident."

But in 1986 there was little govern-



The Lowell, Mass., and Nashua, N.H., LEPCs had started planning this May 2002 exercise before 9-11-01. Fire and police from Lowell, Nashua and surrounding communities responded after a terrorist bomb released a million gallons of industrial chemicals into the Merrimack River. A second explosion at a chemical plant near Lowell took place later in the day, and police had to deal with snipers at both sites.

ment involvement in providing first responder hazmat training or purchasing hazmat equipment. All hazmat response for the region came from factories and railroads that either stored or transported hazardous materials, says Dyer. So the LEPC focused on developing its networks within the region and then developing a response capability.

... with a regional ally

While the Nashua LEPC lacked funding at the outset, the Mid-America LEPC received significant support since its inception from the Mid-America Regional Council. MARC began in 1972 as a regional ambulance-dispatching center, but soon evolved into a planning agency, explains Marlene Nagel, MARC's community development director. As a regional council, MARC helps coordinate LEPC training and education efforts across state lines.

Because the Kansas-Missouri state line bisects the metro area, jurisdiction becomes a problem for the LEPC. While Missouri granted the LEPC the right to become a regional group, Kansas

required that all LEPC groups be organized by county. As a result, the Mid-America LEPC can serve only the counties on the Missouri side of the region, while one LEPC serves each county in Kansas, which complicates efforts at regional emergency response.

For issues that cross borders, the LEPC has relied on the many committees and subcommittees within MARC that have members from both states. For example, the LEPC works closely with the MARC emergency managers committee, which includes EMS from both Kansas and Missouri counties. Similarly, when the LEPC wants to work with medical personnel across the entire region, its members work closely with the emergency medical subcommittee, which formulates regional medical responses across the counties and state lines. And as you'd expect, some LEPC members also serve on these committees.

Dyer currently chairs both the MARC homeland security coordinating committee and the emergency information committee, which is working to tie all of the emergency operations

across the metro area together.

"Such subcommittees in MARC bring together people from various disciplines who are also key decision-makers or delegates from the larger group of people they represent," he says. "When an LEPC can consult responsible people, a body that is organized and has leadership and can make decisions, then the decisions made at LEPC meetings are not just theory, but have a much better opportunity of being implemented."

Mid-America LEPC since 9-11

As terrorism became the dominant focus of the community after Sept. 11, the LEPC did not become the vehicle for forging domestic security initiatives in the Kansas City area. That job was left to the MARC Regional Committee on Homeland Security. But just as MARC helped the LEPC develop regional programs, the LEPC now works with the MARC Homeland Security Coordinating Committee, says Nagel.

She notes that Missouri recently asked the regional council to coordinate a \$9.7 million Homeland Security

Urban Area Initiative Grant that was awarded to the state on behalf of Kansas City. In addition, MARC is administering close to \$3 million in FY 2003 homeland security grants and supplemental awards for the region.

The Mid-America LEPC's chief role since Sept. 11 remains support and training, says Nagel, and it becomes involved in domestic security issues only when training and planning are required for a terrorist act that might include hazardous materials. The LEPC has done such a good job at this that it received the EPA Region III 2002 Partnership Award for its work in interagency hazmat training, hazmat public education and homeland security efforts.

Much of what the Mid-America region has accomplished is based on the trust formed over a long period, says Nagel. "By bringing folks together and having them work on less-sensitive issues at the outset, people got to know one another, learn their capabilities and over time, learn how to do things like allocate \$2 million across the community."

From trash to cash

Clark County, at the southern tip of Nevada, is a study in contrasts, with land uses ranging from rural areas protected by volunteer fire departments to the famous Las Vegas strip. The Clark County LEPC serves an area of roughly 8,000 square miles, about the size of New Jersey. The county is home to about 70% of Nevada's population, and on any given weekend it can undergo an influx of 250,000 visitors.

Alongside those tourists and gamblers, and also a source of revenue, is a stream of low-level radioactive waste (often medical waste) that passes through Clark County on its way to the Nevada Test Site for containment. The state charges the companies that ship this waste a tipping fee of 50 cents per cubic foot, which goes into an account that the state administers for local governments to improve their emergency preparedness planning, training and equipment.

A grants subcommittee handles the Clark County LEPC's share, about \$25,000 annually, says LEPC coordinator Jim O'Brien, which has been spent

on equipment for the county fire department, comprising 13 volunteer fire stations. Past purchases have included a thermal-imaging camera, PPE and a new portable hazmat weather station, O'Brien says.

The LEPC began preparing very hard for terrorist issues as they geared up for Y2K, he explains, and like many other LEPCs across the country, they began forming a WMD working group after the Oklahoma City bombing.

"We've been an all-hazards LEPC since its inception in 1986," says O'Brien. As proof of that, the county's multi-casualty incident plan, joint information plan and terrorism incident plan (which is up for revision soon) were all assembled through the LEPC.

Sunshine State: Strong control

Florida followed a different path when it passed the Florida Emergency Training and Response Community Right-to-Know Act (the state's version of SARA) in 1987 and established the State Emergency Response Commission.

Appointed by the governor, the

SERC oversees the state's 11 regional LEPCs, explains Denise Imbler, program administrator for the Florida Department of Domestic Security. The SERC was also responsible for appointing the original LEPC members in each region.

Each LEPC is attached to a corresponding regional planning council that has spending authority and contracts with the Florida Department of Community Affairs. By linking an LEPC with a regional planning council, Imbler says, the state created a mecha-

nism for immediately funding the LEPCs, which could then build on regional networks and relationships established by the planning councils.

Each LEPC receives money from the Department of Community Affairs to conduct exercises and also U.S. Department of Transportation Hazardous Materials Emergency Preparedness Grant funds to develop planning projects and training related to hazardous materials.

"Our mandate is what it was 12 years ago," says Imbler. "We only do haz-

ardous material training and planning. We don't do domestic security," which is handled by a SERC working group created in 1998. After Sept. 11, it expanded and became the state's working group for domestic security.

Paths to the future

As we've seen, though LEPCs around the country have been meeting their original mandates of providing hazmat training and support to first responders and documenting local hazmat threats, many have also gone beyond that mission. For example, all of the states discussed here now have state and regional hazmat teams, when none had existed before 1986.

The paradox is that, with terrorism now among the hazmat threats, the role of LEPCs has expanded in some communities, while their value may come into question in other communities as new organizations are created to deal with domestic security concerns.

Dyer is concerned that as new groups emerge to address terrorism, it will become more difficult to hold together what the LEPCs have already accomplished. He expects that officials serving on LEPCs will move on to newer homeland security structures, especially as these receive the bulk of federal and state funding.

And as grant dollars are targeted at preparing for terrorist incidents, he asks whether it will also be harder to maintain the level of support needed to deal with local hazmat storage and transport. He then muses about his own LEPC.

"On the one hand, the Mid-America LEPC has representatives on the MARC Homeland Security Coordinating Committee, so every project and proposal at the LEPC is included in the homeland security planning process," says Dyer. "So we have improved our response capability as a community to incidents beyond hazardous material storage and transportation.

"But sometimes I wonder: If we had had good functioning LEPC programs nationwide, would we have even needed to plug in these other organizational structures for terrorism?" HPP

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