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Rural First Responders Bring Training Up to Speed

Domestic preparedness consortium boosts training for rural first responders.

BY MIKE CURRAN / JANUARY 9, 2008

Most attention and much of the resources for all-hazards preparedness and response have been focused on urban areas. Enter the Rural Domestic Preparedness Consortium (RDPC), which was developed to ensure that rural first responders have a continuous resource for their training and preparedness needs. Its goal is also to ensure that rural first responders are up to speed on timely and relevant training and response information, as well as best practices.

And now, this consortium is preparing a series of Department of Homeland Security (DHS)-certified training courses for rural stakeholders that will be offered at no charge across the nation.

"Our country is still in a mode of concentrating training resources toward potential large-scale events that might occur in urban areas," said Gary Wingrove, the chair of the advisory board to the RDPC and the manager of Government Relations and Strategic Affairs for Mayo Clinic Medical Transport in Buffalo, Minn. "The consortium is concentrating on creating curricula centered around the support role of rural responders to urban events, as well as an all-hazards approach more suited to rural communities for the more typical types of events we might be called upon to manage directly."

Eastern Kentucky University's (EKU's) Justice and Safety Center leads the consortium, and partners include East Tennessee State University, Iowa Central Community College,

Northwest Arkansas Community College and the University of Findlay in Ohio.

The DHS awarded \$14.1 million in grants.

The core security



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national needs assessment survey, and the consortium convened a National Rural Emergency Preparedness Summit in September 2007, in Omaha, Neb.

Jo Brosius, director of communications at ECU's Justice and Safety Center, said several pilot training courses are scheduled to begin before the end of 2007. They include Special Event Security Planning for Law Enforcement, developed by the Rural Domestic Preparedness Training Center; Freight Rail Car Incident Response; and Port and Vessel Security for Public Safety Personnel, both developed by the University of Findlay.

"We all feel that we are addressing a gap in a national need," said Mark Alliman, RDPC program manager for the University of Findlay. "As we start rolling these courses out, it will be a lot more evident that we are addressing those gaps and training needs."

Training Needs

The RDPC sent out nearly 3,200 surveys about all-hazards homeland security training needs in summer 2006, and almost 1,000 completed surveys were returned by rural officials in the fields of law enforcement, fire, emergency medical services, public health and general local government.

Planning for terrorism events was identified as the primary training need across all stakeholder groups. However, each group had different priorities. The highest-rated training need for each group was:

- **Law enforcement** -- responder safety and health.
- **Fire service** -- citizen preparedness and participation.
- **Emergency medical service** -- chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, explosives

(CBRNE) detection.

- **Public health** -- planning for terrorism events.
- **General government** -- weapons of mass destruction/hazardous materials response and decontamination.

It was no surprise that every discipline has significant unmet training needs, Brosius said, adding, "If there were any surprises, it would be that each discipline identified a different area as its top priority in terms of the number of personnel needing training."

The survey results showed that the general government sector has the greatest need for training among all the groups. The RDPC notes that government officials are not often considered first responders. "But oftentimes it is the local mayor, county judge/executive, or city manager who is one of the first officials to address the media and the general public." They are also often the primary contacts for state and federal assistance.

The RDPC plans to follow up with a more detailed survey of the needs of general government officials, work with national associations representing this group, and explore adapting existing training curriculum to the needs of general government officials.

The consortium reports that rural first responders prefer local, hands-on training, although they are generally willing to participate in online and video-conference training sessions.

The RDPC plans to make the National Rural Emergency Preparedness Summit an annual event, to be held in rural communities across the country. Participants in the first summit identified and prioritized 15 critical areas for the RDPC to focus on. The recommendations include evacuation and quarantine, agroterrorism, interoperable communications, surviving the first 48 hours, and post-incident responder and family care.

"Training is something you should do continuously, but it's difficult, especially when you look at volunteers," Alliman said. "And that's just a fact of rural America. We need to let folks like that know that RDPC is there, and we have listened to them, and we're putting good training programs together to help address their needs."

Michael P. Curran is a writer who lives in Westchester County, N.Y.

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