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Hazardous Materials Preparedness: Training For All-Hazards Response Emergency Responder Hazardous Materials Technician: One-Stop Preparedness Shop

By Shannon Arledge, CDP Public Affairs

The recent botched attempt to discharge explosive material in New York's Times Square may leave city leaders across America questioning their own levels of preparedness during an emergency.

The Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP), located in Anniston, Ala., plays a leading role in preparing cities and local response forces to protect, prevent, deter, and respond to acts of terrorism or major accidents involving hazardous materials.

According to Captain William Brown, from the Minot Police Department, Minot, N.D., the Emergency Responder Hazardous Materials Technician (ERHM) course reinforced situational awareness, identified potential hazards, and emphasized the need to communicate with other disciplines.

"First responders, especially law enforcement, need to recognize the need for enhanced training regarding first response to hazardous materials," added Brown. "Whether it is a chemical spill, train derailment, or a terrorist attack, police officers must recognize the threat is real and their role is vital to ensure any threats to the public are minimized, if not mitigated." He went on to say, "I am now better prepared proactively by recognizing potential threats, identifying available resources, and realizing the need to work collectively with other first responders in addressing methods to impact those events should they occur."

Released earlier this year, the Quadrennial Homeland Security Review Report stated that, among others, the threats and hazards that challenge U.S. interests include "high-consequence weapons of mass destruction." The report further specifies improvised nuclear devices and high-consequence biological weapons would have the greatest potential effects if used against the United States.

New York's recent failed attempt to kill and maim innocent people may be an example of what the "bad guys" are planning, in order to disrupt order, create chaos, and instill fear across the nation.

"The ERHM program is relevant to all responders," said Frank Esposito, acting course manager. "Whether you are a fire fighter, police officer, or emergency medical technician, all response personnel must have an understanding of identifying and mitigating hazards. This course is a response course and we teach first responders to respond properly, save lives, protect themselves, and mitigate the scene."

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Hazardous Materials Preparedness: Training For All-Hazards Response (Cont.)

Among the many courses offered at the CDP for emergency response personnel, ERHM is a five-day class providing responders with a combination of lectures and advanced hands-on practical exercises.

The course introduces response personnel to the terrorist threat, the hazardous materials management system, responder health and safety, the Incident Command System (ICS), site management, information management, response objectives, and terminating the incident. The responder receives hands-on training in identifying hazardous materials, using advanced surveying and monitoring equipment, selecting and using the appropriate level of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and performing decontamination procedures.

“It is a busy week of training,” said Mike Aguilar, CDP training specialist. “But well worth the time when you consider the importance of having a well trained hazardous materials technician in hometown America.” Aguilar stressed, “The responders from various disciplines attending this course arrive at the CDP with very little or no experience responding to a hazardous materials incident. Graduates of this course return to their jurisdictions better prepared to safely respond to and mitigate a HAZMAT incident including weapons of mass destruction involving chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive materials.”

In December 2008, the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism released a unanimous threat assessment which stated: “Unless the world community acts decisively and with great urgency, it is more likely than not that a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) will be used in a terrorist attack somewhere in the world by the end of 2013—that weapon is more likely to be biological than nuclear.”

These conclusions make it more evident that response personnel must remain vigilant and skilled with the preparedness knowledge to protect the citizens and cities they serve. ERHM provides the necessary training to prepare response personnel to tackle hazardous incidents.

The CDP is the only facility operated by the federal government for civilian training in Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and Explosive (CBRNE) events. The CDP fully funds all training—including airfare, lodging and meals.

The CDP is a component of the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s National Training and Education Division in the Department of Homeland Security. The Anniston training center is the nation’s only federally-chartered Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) training facility for civilian responders.

Learn more about the CDP at <http://cdp.dhs.gov>.