



A Disaster Waiting To Happen

When the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) published a list of disaster preparedness training objectives in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, chances are the agency did not envision that it would result in 72 hours of mass casualties and terrorist threats.

However, on an early September weekend last year, Moundsville, West Virginia, faced a domestic terrorist drug laboratory, a suspicious package, poisoned picnickers, a boat collision, and more. For the second time in 2 years, Moundsville was in the midst of a series of incidents that would tax public safety agencies to their limits.

But for this Ohio Valley town and surrounding area it was all just part of Mock Disaster 2003, sponsored by the National Corrections and Law Enforcement Training and Technology Center (NCLETTTC).

NCLETTTC, located in Moundsville, was established as a year-round training and technology center for corrections, law enforcement, and public safety first-responder organizations. The September 2003 event was the second mock disaster organized by the center with assistance from the National Institute of Justice's Office of Law Enforcement Technology Commercialization and the National Technology Transfer Center's Emergency Response Technology Program, both in nearby Wheeling, West Virginia.

The first mock disaster in 2002 received a national first-place award from the Government Security Expo and Conference and U.S. Law Enforcement Exposition and Conference in the category of Disaster Preparedness/First Responders. But NCLETTTC and its partners in planning the 2003 event saw room for improvement.

Suzanne Park, outreach manager for NCLETTTC, says that in designing Mock Disaster 2003, the planning committee—which included local, State, and Federal law enforcement, hospitals and health departments, fire departments, environmental protection agencies, medical examiners, and local chemical companies—tried to keep in mind such issues as communications difficulties (interoperability) and delays in calling in other agencies.

Months of planning resulted in six separate, yet inter-related, scenarios based on the FEMA training objectives. Park says the participating agencies ranked the objectives according to their needs. The planners incorporated the objectives that received the highest overall scores into the scenarios, along with special requests for other activities such as an accident with multiple extractions, a boating accident involving alcohol use, and a biological attack.

THE SCENARIO FOR DISASTER

The "disaster" began and ended with the informant: a phone call about illegal activities at "Acme Environmental Labs," then the recovery of a barrel full of "remains" from the river. In between, participants in Mock Disaster 2003 faced a series of related scenarios—each with its own set of challenges and training opportunities.

On a Friday afternoon last September, law enforcement officials in Moundsville, West Virginia, received a call from an informant—a member of a domestic terrorist group—that Acme Environmental Labs served as a cover for a clandestine drug laboratory. Immediately, West Virginia State Police, along with special response, explosive ordnance disposal, and sniper teams, went to a booby-trapped rural cabin. The evidence collected by law enforcement and other first responders proved key to responding to the scenarios that followed. It showed that the terrorists were using the Internet to communicate, had created fake identification for themselves, and were targeting elected officials for assassination.

The next morning, the arrival of a suspicious package at the local wastewater treatment plant pulled city police, fire, and rescue agencies to one side of town. Recognizing that they lacked the proper equipment and resources, the local agencies called in an explosive response team from the West Virginia State Police.

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The agencies taking part in the six scenarios included emergency medical services, fire departments, law enforcement and corrections agencies, 911 centers, hospitals, medical examiners' offices, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Armed Forces, the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, utility companies, local industries—even a hospice. Park recalls her surprise when she learned that a local hospice wanted to join in the drill. She learned that after September 11, hospice agencies took on bereavement counseling following mass deaths. Because the scenarios included multiple fatalities, the hospice would fit in.

“We brought them all in, and said let’s make this as real-life as possible,” Park says. “While at first it might seem farfetched to have this type of drill in rural West Virginia, when you stop and think about it, we have the Ohio River right here, we have Interstate 70 coming through the area, and it’s really quite feasible. We’re talking West Virginia, and we’re also talking rural United States. This is how most of us live and work. Most of us don’t live in large cities.”

The mock disaster planners had to do more than develop the six scenarios. They also drew up plans for the workshops and vendor demonstrations that would be held during the 3-day event. Workshops, Park says, ranged from “Moulage 101” (preparing “victims” for participation in a mock disaster drill) to “Terrorist ID for Everyday People” (how to help mail carriers, meter readers, and others identify suspicious behavior) to “Rope Rescue Operations for the Emergency Responder.” Participants had 24 workshop sessions to choose from, 6 of which were offered twice.

Participants also could visit approximately 50 vendor exhibits displaying new technologies. Prior to the event, the planning committee reviewed the technologies to be displayed and selected several for use in particular scenarios. For example, a thermal imaging camera was made available for evidence collection in a dimly lit warehouse.

If a new technology did not fit into a scenario, vendors could demonstrate their products in a scheduled session. Technologies demonstrated included chemical detection systems, personal alarms, a smoke generator for use in firefighter training, gear to protect first responders from extreme heat, respiratory protection gear, thermal vision gear, and incident monitoring software.

“There’s a lot going on, and obviously people want to be part of this,” Park says. “The vendors want to get the technology out there, and sometimes, when they give demonstrations at conferences and meetings, they don’t get to show it to the end user. This event allowed the end users to see and use it.”

Those end users owe their opportunity to see that technology to a group of area emergency medical technicians (EMTs) who began planning the first mock disaster drill early in 2001, according to NCLETTC Director Steve

The Scenario for Disaster (continued)

Meanwhile, across town at a local park, an area hospital association was holding its annual picnic. A report of what was thought to be an explosive device in a garbage can brought a few first responders to the park. Shortly after they arrived, dozens of people attending the picnic became violently ill. These “victims” walked into the emergency rooms of a half-dozen local hospitals, forcing the hospitals’ infectious disease specialists to call in assistance from local health departments.

That afternoon, the underwater rescue team received a call to retrieve two barrels from the nearby Ohio River. One contained a number of body parts in pieces too small to identify (DNA testing later identified them as the informant). The other contained “suspicious substances.” [Editor’s note: Although a more complicated scenario had been planned, heavy rains in the area reduced this to a dive and recovery operation.]

Finally, a truck carrying chemicals—and driven by one of the terrorists—was headed for a plant on the Ohio River when it collided with a school bus. First responders had to deal with possibly hazardous chemicals, multiple extractions, and several deaths.

“We really tried to roll in as many different types of responses to situations as we could,” says Suzanne Park, outreach manager for the National Corrections and Law Enforcement Training and Technology Center, which hosted the 3-day mock disaster. “One of the things we learned from the first mock disaster in 2002 is that these agencies don’t have the opportunity to participate in training with a broad spectrum of other agencies. They train within themselves, or maybe with one or two others. Participating in the 2002 drill opened a lot of eyes, and participants said they really needed to learn which agencies have what resources available.

“Planning the 2003 event became a really awesome learning experience for everyone involved,” Park adds. “This is about how to use both the resources at hand and the other resources available in the community. One agency cannot be and do everything. It’s about learning who has the resources and the capabilities.”

On Sunday, Sherry Muncy from the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Clarksburg, West Virginia, gave a briefing on the results of the exercises. Muncy shared with agency leaders what her role would be in prosecuting the event and how their work would affect what she presented. She praised the agencies for their level of training and preparedness. “Witnessing this event was such a remarkable experience. It has given me a much better understanding of what you do in your preparation and training to protect our communities.”

Morrison. That group brought NCLETTTC into the process to help it obtain funding, Morrison says. After September 11, its members realized that communities need to prepare to deal with all aspects of a disaster. The group called on NCLETTTC's resources to help bring fire departments, law enforcement agencies, and hospitals into the planning process. What started out as an EMT-only drill became Mock Disaster 2002. That initial event featured only one scenario—a chemical attack by a domestic terrorist group on spectators and a high school band at a political rally.

"It has been a unique experience to see the first-responder community coming together to work on this project," Morrison says. "More importantly, we have seen agencies partnering and working together because of their knowledge of each others' capabilities, training, and equipment. This is the ultimate in community team building."

In addition to helping secure funding and bringing other agencies on board, NCLETTTC, located in the former West Virginia Penitentiary in Moundsville, has the ideal facilities to host the mock disaster. When not hosting such special training events as mock disasters or the annual Mock Prison Riot, Morrison says, NCLETTTC facilities are open to corrections, law enforcement, and other public safety agencies for training. Some portions of the

penitentiary have been renovated into state-of-the-art classrooms, but most of the cells remain untouched and can be used for practice in cell extraction, prisoner restraint and control, hostage negotiation, and more. In addition, public safety professionals can attend scheduled classes at NCLETTTC, vendors can rent space to put on demonstrations, or agencies can rent facilities for use in training exercises. NCLETTTC also offers basic and advanced computer classes to the general public with more community outreach projects being planned.

For more information about the National Corrections and Law Enforcement Training and Technology Center, its programs, and facilities, call 304-843-4147, or visit the center's website at www.nclettcc.org.



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