

It's Not Just Training, It's Preparedness *By Shannon Arledge*

When the Center for Domestic Preparedness, located in Anniston, Ala., was founded in 1998, it was envisioned as a resident training facility that would train a maximum of 10,000 responders per year. In FY 2009, the CDP staff trained close to 99,000 responders from across the United States and its territories, well exceeding the initial expectations of the late '90s. Recently, the CDP celebrated its 500,000th graduate, another milestone as the center moves into its 12th year.

A unique feature of CDP training is that the majority of the resident and non-resident training courses are interdisciplinary, promoting greater understanding among diverse responder disciplines: Emergency Management, Emergency Medical Services, Fire Service, Governmental Administrative, Hazardous Materials, Healthcare, Law Enforcement, Public Health, Public Safety Communications, and Public Works.

Nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, the CDP's training program features more than 40 unique courses that offer emergency responders everything from radiation contamination and incident response training to pandemic influenza and healthcare emergency management.

A popular aspect of the CDP is the fact that it is home to the nation's only toxic chemical training facility for emergency responders. The faculty and students refer to the training site as the "COBRATF", which stands for Chemical, Ordnance, Biological, and Radiological Training Facility. The COBRATF features civilian training exercises in a true toxic environment, using chemical agents.

"The COBRA exceeded my expectations," said Lt. Stephen Weiler, a police officer from Illinois. "I feel very comfortable now attempting to provide quality response to a mass casualty incident. I really enjoyed how we tested two separate nerve agents. The COBRA facility has boosted my confidence to respond, now that I know my gear will work and keep me safe."

Although practical application with toxic agents is a highlight of some courses, classroom instruction offers expert advice from instructors and students alike who have served on the frontlines day after day in hometown America. The CDP uses the latest techniques and procedures and some of the best equipment available during the instruction.

Instructors at the CDP each have a minimum of 10 years of required emergency responder experience before they are even considered for a position. Each instructor is carefully selected, based on experience, knowledge of the national response elements, and ability to teach.

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In 2007, the CDP welcomed the Noble Training Facility into its training venue. The former Army Noble Hospital was converted into a training site for health and medical education in disasters and mass casualty events. It serves as the only operational hospital in the U.S. dedicated to training.

“You can never fully focus on the exercise at home,” said Dr. Mary-Elise Manuell, emergency medicine director from Worcester, Mass. “[At the CDP] you operate inside an actual hospital, which is so amazing,” she stressed. “When you come down here [to Alabama] and experience these fully-functional exercises and realize the broad impact they have, you want to go back and ensure your facility is ready for just about any type of incident.”

The cost to attend CDP training courses is minimal for qualified responders, as the Department of Homeland Security picks up the tab for travel, meals, and lodging. The devotion of time and attention is only asked in return.

“The CDP offers one-of-a-kind training you can’t find anywhere else,” said Rick Dickson, assistant director of Training Delivery. “This facility is an asset to the nation, and the best part is, the training is funded, for state, local and tribal response personnel.”

The CDP provides America’s emergency responders with skills for response to potential terrorism, making America a safer place. Preparing a nation capable of protecting itself and responding to critical emergencies are among the many accomplishments realized each week at the Alabama training center.

The CDP is a vital artery for the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s National Preparedness Directorate’s national readiness in the Department of Homeland Security. Learn more about the CDP at <http://cdp.dhs.gov>.