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Hazardous Materials Course Focus on WMD Attack and Response

By Shannon Arledge, CDP Public Affairs

The threats against America and its citizens has become real, and the need for ready responders is ever more critical. Response personnel must remain vigilant, and skilled with the preparedness knowledge to protect the citizens and cities they serve.

An organization or community should not question its readiness or the abilities of its response forces. 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 or toxic materials, or events resulting in mass casualties.

“The emergency response community in the United States needs to avoid complacency and continue to prepare for a wide range of potential terrorist attacks that will likely include chemical, biological, radiological, or explosive material,” said Rick Dickson, assistant director for training delivery. He went on to add, “Many independent reports highlight the potential for attacks based on threat assessments, and in many cases specify a reality that the potential use of weapons of mass destruction is still ever present.” Dickson further stated, “Training is a critical element of preparedness, and the center’s fully funded training opportunities for state, tribal, and local emergency responders, are designed to prepare individuals and teams for what may be reality.”

The Hazardous Materials Technician (HT) for CBRNE Incidents course provides students an overview of the international and domestic threats with a spotlight on identification and decontamination of biological or chemical hazards. The course also includes hazardous materials technical training for operating in an all-hazards environment and preservation of crime scene evidence. The HT course presents training that incorporates advanced competencies, technology, and tactics that focus on the specific threats associated with chemical, biological, radiological, and explosive material.

“After attending the course I have a lot more confidence in the [personal protective equipment (PPE)] I wear,” said Kevin Burns, a member of his hospital’s decontamination team in Fort Worth, Texas. “There’s also a lot of information about Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). I feel that I have a better awareness about the threats and how to protect the public, stay prepared, and respond if something happens.”

“Responders should expect to walk away with their current set of skills enhanced,” said Rob Low, CDP course manager of hazardous materials programs. “This course is designed for someone with a basic level of hazmat knowledge. We send them away with an understanding of technician level operations.”

The course extends three days and quickly moves the students from the classroom to hands-on experience—responding to a potential crime scene involving hazardous substances. These drills allow students to practice and reinforce their new skills and knowledge in a realistic training environment. The exercise areas are enhanced with realistic props, loud and confusing noise, alarms, and theatrical smoke. The responders enter with just the assistance of their response equipment and a handheld flashlight.

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Hazardous Materials Course Focus on WMD Attack and Response (Cont.)

“You get just enough classroom and then you are in the field doing it real-world,” said David Luster an incident responder with Oregon’s state highway department. “I am very confident. We performed to a standard; not taking advantage of this funded training is no one’s fault but your own.”

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

The HT course culminates at the Chemical, Ordnance, Biological, and Radiological (COBRA) training facility--the only training site of its kind for civilian emergency responders. Working with nerve agents GB (Sarin) and VX the students continue the scenario to rescue and protect citizens, preserve evidence, and locate and identify the toxic substance.

“I definitely think that the fact we worked with a toxic agent stepped it up a notch compared to the standard drills responders perform,” said Catherine Brennan, a university chemical hygiene officer from Chapel Hill, N.C. “Working in a room with real nerve agent was a great experience. I feel more confident and prepared.”

“Our objective is to make sure the student leaves here with a solid understanding of hazardous materials and WMD,” said Butch Tolbert, WMD hazardous materials instructor. “HT is a challenging course. The responders can take these challenges and incorporate their past experience to develop a positive response if it is needed in their home jurisdictions.”

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.

More information regarding this course can be found at <http://cdp.dhs.gov>. Locate resident training and link to Program A.