

Expect the Unexpected: Public Health Response Planning in Action

On January 17, 2015, a breach in an oil pipeline caused 50,000 gallons of oil to spill into the Yellowstone River. This river is the main drinking water source for the more than 6,000 residents of Dawson County, Montana, which includes the city of Glendive. Fortunately, the Dawson County government, including the Dawson County Health Department (DCHD), was prepared to take action and protect the health of its residents.

Dawson County quickly established an emergency operations center and enlisted community partners, including DCHD, to assist in the response. DCHD relied on planning, training, and exercising—which are funded and supported by CDC’s PHEP cooperative agreement—to successfully respond to the oil spill. The water system was quickly shut down, and a point-of-dispensing (POD) was stood up to distribute drinking water to the residents. DCHD’s Emergency Medical Countermeasures Plan and related POD training facilitated the efficient water distribution process.

DCHD also activated its emergency notification system to ensure residents received their needed drinking water. Calls were made to schools, daycares, clinics, retirement homes, the county correctional center, and facilities and organizations serving people with disabilities

to let them know water would be available. Additional messaging through DCHD press releases and a hotline before and during the operations helped guide residents through the water distribution process.

DCHD provided just-in-time training on point-

of-dispensing operations to volunteers and Dawson County employees staffing the POD. Using a toolkit, the POD was set up in 30 minutes in a community center. Water was distributed for a total of five days, with most residents

reporting receiving their allocated amount of water within 5–10 minutes of arriving at the point-of-dispensing.

Prior to the emergency, DCHD updated its emergency response plans and the local PHEP coordinator, Jennifer Fladager, received POD training from CDC in July 2013. These preparations, and other PHEP-funded resources, prepared county officials to effectively and efficiently respond to the oil spill. According to Fladager, “When it comes to frontier regions such as Dawson County, PHEP is one of the few resources available in regards to trained individuals and supplies. We don’t have big fire departments, and we have a one-person Disaster and Emergency Services department located in Dawson County.”



*Jennifer Fladager,
PHEP Coordinator,
Dawson County
Health Department*

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Photo credit: Maurice Luke