

Preparing for a Chemical Threat Event through Practice

Rapid communication and open collaboration are essential components to successfully respond to chemical threat events that can impact public health. The 2014 Florida Chemical Exposure Full Scale Exercise provided the Florida Department of Health (DOH), Bureau of Public Health Laboratories (BPHL), an opportunity to practice these skills with various partner agencies throughout the state. In the exercise scenario, people were theoretically exposed to sarin, a dangerous nerve agent, at Florida malls and shopping centers. This exercise offered a learning environment for many agencies to work together to prepare for effective responses to a chemical exposure event.

Twenty-three Florida counties participated in the exercise, including representatives from Florida DOH, 30 hospitals, Florida Fusion Center (a federal and state collaboration for gathering and sharing information), the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Florida Highway Patrol, and Florida Department of Law Enforcement. This exercise tested a variety of capabilities including communication, specimen packing, shipping, analysis, surge capacity, and results reporting. The exercise activities allowed Florida's Chemical Threat Program to successfully measure and validate the selected public health preparedness target capabilities, information sharing and public health laboratory testing.

The 2014 Florida Chemical Exposure Full Scale Exercise encouraged additional "spin-off" exercises and training opportunities. Several participating hospitals evaluated their decontamination protocols, extending participation beyond employees to community volunteers. Thirteen hospitals collaborated with Florida Poison Information Centers (Jacksonville, Tampa, and Miami regions) by reporting symptoms from several mock patients via the toll free number. This enabled the Florida Poison Information Centers to enter and monitor case data and assess staff response capabilities. In addition, toxicologists evaluated the symptoms and provided feedback concerning patient exposure. The level of participation enabled the Chemical Threat Program to extend Chemical Threat Preparedness Training to several hospitals in the Miami, Tampa, and Jacksonville regions.

Exercise participants are now aware of possible issues that may occur during a chemical exposure event and the scope of agency interaction during a response. Exercises are invaluable tools for disaster preparedness and for fulfilling the Florida Department of Health's mission "to protect, promote, and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county, and community efforts."

