



Shannon Arledge

## Successful Partnership to Provide Critical Environmental Health Response Training to Practitioners

**Editor's Note:** This is the first of two columns this month about the Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) Awareness Level course. NEHA strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature a column from the Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the *Journal*.

In this column, EHSB and guest authors from across CDC will highlight a variety of concerns, opportunities, challenges, and successes that we all share in environmental public health. EHSB's objective is to strengthen the role of state, local, and national environmental health programs and professionals to anticipate, identify, and respond to adverse environmental exposures and the consequences of these exposures for human health. The services being developed through EHSB include access to topical, relevant, and scientific information; consultation; and assistance to environmental health specialists, sanitarians, and environmental health professionals and practitioners.

The conclusions in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Shannon Arledge is a public affairs specialist at the Federal Emergency Management Agency Center for Domestic Preparedness in Anniston, Alabama. A retired Marine gunnery sergeant, he served in numerous public affairs/public information assignments during his 20 years on active duty. He deployed twice to the Persian Gulf as a public affairs chief.

Emergency responders face a variety of threats. Man-made or accidental hazardous events not only require the protection of human life, they require the sustainment of a safe operation to protect themselves over an extended period of time. Responders and commanders have many factors to consider, and the health and well-being of the com-

munity and response force must not be overlooked—that's when public health comes in.

In early 2009, the Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP) in Anniston, Alabama, partnered with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta to deliver the Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) Awareness Level

course at CDP. CDP is the perfect training setting because its chartered mission is to train state, local, and tribal response personnel facing today's natural or man-made threats. The center provides funding for state, local, and tribal emergency responders.

### EHTER: First Step

EHTER is the first step toward a standardized preparedness training program for environmental health specialists. A more uniform training program will better prepare environmental health practitioners to meet the needs of affected communities. For more information about EHTER, visit [http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Workforce\\_Development/EHTER.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Workforce_Development/EHTER.htm).

"Environmental hazards are part of all disasters," said Tim Darnell, director for the Mississippi State Office of Environmental Health and a recent EHTER graduate. He added, "This course provides awareness to emergency response personnel and allows them to take adequate precautions to protect themselves and their colleagues and recognize situations where intervention is needed to mitigate these hazards."

"Environmental health [EH] is a broad discipline," added Darnell. He continued, "Consequently, most environmental health specialists do not work in all areas of EH, but are often required to do so in emergency response situations. This course provides EH response training in all areas, and provides an opportunity to network with other EH specialists from across the country, and share best practices and lessons learned from their experiences. The EHTER course also educates emergency response personnel about the importance of involving environmental health

specialists in all phases of disaster response, including planning, response, and recovery.”

The EHTER course consists of four days that include presentations, group activities/exercises, and demonstration components by experienced staff. CDC assures course curriculum and quality, and continues to expand the class, in partnership with CDP.

“Our partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is a wonderful success story,” said Mike Aguilar, CDP training specialist. “Blending the expertise and dedication of the CDC and CDP has enabled the environmental health community to receive much-needed training that will enhance their ability to respond to future disasters. The [CDC-CDP] partnership will grow stronger as we continue to support the preparedness needs of the environmental health community.”

“Environmental health practitioners are vital to the response effort,” said Bernice Zaidel, assistant director of curriculum development and evaluation. “The EHTER course meets the needs of the environmental health professional and unlocks the door for other

response disciplines to broaden their knowledge regarding the environmental health response. To put it simply, environmental health preparedness training ensures a more comprehensive and safer response.”

### Unique CDP Courses and Facility

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

CDP is also 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.

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.

### Fully Funded Training

CDP training for state, local, and tribal responders is fully funded by FEMA, a component of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Round-trip air and ground transportation, lodging, and meals are provided at no cost to responders, their agency, or jurisdiction.

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 CDP at <http://cdp.dhs.gov>.

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## EHTER: Where Does It Go From Here?

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### Need for Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response

The environmental health workforce in the United States faces critical challenges in many different areas. The need for emergency preparedness and response training and education is particularly urgent and has

been documented in several assessments. To help meet this need, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) collaborated with federal, state, and local environmental health and other partners to develop the Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) Awareness Level course (Miller, 2008).

During emergencies and disasters, environmental health professionals perform many critical functions, such as conducting shelter assessments, testing drinking water supplies, performing food safety inspections, and controlling disease-causing vectors. Many of these functions may already fall within the existing role of environmental health programs, but emergencies and disasters present additional challenges and needs. The EHTER Awareness Level course teaches students how to apply environmental health information during emergency response and addresses the following areas from this perspective:

- disaster management,
- responder safety,
- potable water,
- wastewater,
- solid waste and hazardous materials,
- food safety,
- vector control and pest management,
- building assessments,
- shelters, and
- radiation.

The EHTER Awareness Level course is available to the environmental health workforce in state, local, and tribal jurisdictions in various ways:

- free online access to the course on the NEHA Web site ([http://www.nehacert.org/catalog/index.php?main\\_page=index&cPath=28](http://www.nehacert.org/catalog/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=28)) and
- resident training at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Federal Emergency Management Agency's Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP) in Anniston, Alabama (see "Successful Partnership to Provide Critical Environmental Health Response Training to Practitioners," on page 36, for more information).

## DHS Collaboration

In March 2009, CDC signed a memorandum of agreement with CDP to deliver the EHTER Awareness Level course at CDP's training facilities in Anniston (see photo top right). This partnership allows state, local, and tribal environmental health practitioners and other response partners to attend the course at no cost to them or their jurisdictions. CDP covers all costs associated with travel, lodging, food, and training. Emergency responders benefit by receiving much-needed education and training during a time when they might otherwise not receive it due to state budget crises and funding shortfalls for travel and training. For more information on CDP and its course offerings, please visit <http://cdp.dhs.gov>.

## Numbers Trained

Since the first delivery of the EHTER Awareness Level course at the 70th NEHA Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition in San Antonio, Texas, in 2006, more than 1,100 environmental health professionals have been trained from all states, the District of Columbia, and several U.S. territories. More than 600 alone have taken the course at CDP in Anniston since March 2009! Several states including Arizona, California, Florida, Louisiana, and West Virginia have adopted and modified the EHTER curriculum to meet their specific needs and have delivered the course within their jurisdictions by using state and local experts.

## Expansion of EHTER

The EHTER Awareness Level course provides a basic understanding of environmental health emergency response. For a more comprehensive training and education program, however, both operational-level and planning/management-level courses must be developed. CDC realized the need for more advanced levels of EHTER courses early in the developmental process. To help meet this need, CDC turned to the experts—state and local environmental health emergency responders—for their expertise and assistance.

When disasters occur, state and local environmental health professionals are often the first to respond, working to address the environmental health concerns of and care for the affected population. They are the first to arrive and the last to leave.

They remain for weeks, months, and sometimes years to address a community's long-term recovery needs. The people engaged in this work have a plethora of knowledge about both the short- and long-term environmental health issues associated with emergencies and disasters. Recognizing the need to consult these experts, CDC's Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB) hosted an EHTER Consultancy Forum in October 2009 in Atlanta to ask experts for their ideas in developing the next level of EHTER courses.

During the two-day EHTER Consultancy Forum, CDC collaborated with more than 30 environmental health professionals from around the country to identify the topics and subject areas that the next level of EHTER courses should address. Recommended formats and methods for delivering these courses (e.g., classroom style, hands-on, demonstration components, exercises, etc.) were also discussed. Participant ideas and recommendations were captured through a facilitated process (see photo, bottom right). All information was ranked and prioritized to create a framework that will guide the development of future EHTER courses.

## What's Next?

CDC plans to begin developing EHTER operational-level modules and courses in late summer 2010 and hopes to pilot them through various mechanisms in early 2011. The development of planning/management-level modules and courses will follow in 2011.

For more information on EHTER, please visit [http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Workforce\\_Development/EHTER.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Workforce_Development/EHTER.htm). 🐼

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## Reference

Miller, M.D. (2008). Emergency preparedness and response training for environmental health practitioners. *Journal of Environmental Health*, 70(8), 62–63.



An American Red Cross orientation during an Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) course in Anniston, Alabama.



Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) Consultancy Forum participants rank and prioritize recommendations for future EHTER modules and courses.

## CDP History

CDP was founded in 1998 and was initially envisioned to train 10,000 emergency response personnel per year. In fiscal year 2010, however, the center has already trained more than 30,000 responders. In fact, CDP has trained more than 530,000 emergency response personnel in its almost 12 years.

## did you know

80% of West Nile virus infections are estimated to be asymptomatic.

Source: *MMWR*, April 2, 2010.