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New Emergency Response Training for Environmental Health Professionals

Editor's Note: 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 these columns, EHSB and guest authors share insights and information about environmental health programs, trends, issues, and resources. The conclusions in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of CDC.

Martin Kalis is a public health advisor with CDC's EHSB. He is the program manager for CDC's Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER). Bernice Zaidel is the assistant director of curriculum development and evaluation at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP). She is CDP's lead for partnering with EHSB and developing EHTER courses.

Nearly 10 years ago, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB) delivered the first Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) Awareness Level course at the National Environmental Health Association's 2006 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition in San Antonio, Texas. Based on the tremendous success of this introductory level course, EHSB and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP) in Anniston, Alabama, are pleased to announce a new EHTER course focused on emergency operations.

The EHTER Operations course is a four-day, hands-on, performance-based training for environmental health professionals and other responders. The course provides operations level knowledge and skills needed to respond to natural, technological, and human caused disasters. Participants are trained to identify problems, hazards, and risks; plan for team response; select appropriate equipment and instrumentation; perform required tasks using environmental health response protocols; and report and participate in follow-up activities as instructed.

Most of the course involves hands-on operations practice and response to simulated

events. Participants perform environmental health responder tasks while wearing appropriate personal protective equipment. The course also includes training at CDP's Chemical, Ordnance, Biological, and Radiological Training Facility, where participants engage in scenario-based exercises to sharpen skills in selecting and using appropriate equipment and sampling instruments.

Key Skills

The following are some of the critical skills taught during the EHTER Operations course.

- Preparing as a team to respond to suspected water supply contamination in a potentially hazardous environment.
- Determining corrective actions for water supplies contaminated by chemicals and bacteria.
- Determining safety and health requirements for a displaced population and environmental health shelter concerns using CDC's Environmental Health Assessment Form for Shelters.
- Conducting food safety assessments for emergency mass feeding operations, including implementing corrective actions and reporting on foodborne illness outbreaks.
- Identifying nonstructural building safety and health hazards following a major disaster to facilitate reentry and re-occupancy.
- Communicating complex environmental health and safety information to nontechnical audiences, including the media and the public.

The EHTER Operations course provides environmental health professionals and other responders the opportunity to immerse themselves in simulated emergency situations and



Students prepare to conduct an environmental health building assessment following a simulated disaster during the Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response Operations course.

disasters to learn and practice environmental health skills (see photo above). With a small instructor-to-student ratio and ample trained role players and props, participants have ready access to instructors for questions and critiques.

Pilot Course Participants Share Their Experiences

Participants from various environmental health programs and jurisdictions across the country attended and provided critical feedback during four pilot courses. Kim Zabel, deputy assistant secretary of environmental public health for the Washington Department of Health, registered for the pilot course to gain necessary knowledge and skills during a disaster. She brought additional state and local staff with her so they could train

as a team and prepare for future emergencies and disasters in the state. According to Zabel, “The opportunity for so many Washington representatives to attend this course at the same time, learning the same content with local health partners, was a magical moment.” Grateful to attend the course alongside her colleagues, she added, “It’s important to see how they work together.” When a disaster strikes in Washington, part of her role will be determining how to build the team that will respond.

Victor Faconti, an environmental health supervisor who serves as a member of the Florida Environmental Health Strike Team for his region, also attended a pilot course. He said the biggest environmental hazards his team must plan for are hurricanes,

Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) Quick Links

- EHTER Operations course (in person): <https://cdp.dhs.gov/training/courses/ehter%20ops>
- EHTER Awareness Level course (online, independent study): www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/eLearn/EHTER.htm

although they prepare for all types of hazards. According to Faconti, “You need to be fresh. You need to be up-to-date. You need to be a good team player.” Faconti said he appreciated the opportunity to participate in the EHTER Operations course and recommends it to all environmental health professionals. “This is awesome training! I’ve worked in environmental health for 29 years and I wish I had known about this training 25 years ago,” Faconti said. “I’m going to recommend to my boss that we send all of our staff here. I’m going to recommend this course to my county and the surrounding counties,” he added. “I have people who work for me who say, ‘What do we do during a disaster?’ This is it! This is what we do during a disaster!”

CDC and FEMA invite you to join with environmental health professionals and other response partners for this exciting new EHTER course. Visit www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/eLearn/EHTER.htm today to register. 🐼

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Did You Know?

NEHA was awarded the Serve From the Heart grant from Aveda to fund an initiative that will bring Aveda and NEHA staff, local organizations and residents, and environmental health professionals together for service projects that aim to educate the community on environmental threats and its relation to human health.