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The keys to keeping first responders safe in CBRN/ HazMat Incident

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There are two keys to ensuring the safety of our first responders when responding the CBRN/ HazMat incidents. Elected and government officials; and citizens alike have a legal and moral duty to both require and ensure our responders are adequately equipped and trained to meet the unique demands of these environments.

It is not enough to purchase a full array of safety and monitoring equipment. Responders need to be thoroughly knowledgeable about the capabilities, limitations and applications and be proficient in the use of each piece of equipment, and that takes a great deal of training.

The regulations exist to guide training requirements, but the sad truth is that many first responders are not knowledgeable or skilled in the use of their equipment. There isn't enough time and whenever there are budget cuts training is often the first to go. Trainers everywhere can cite examples of how the lack of comprehensive training of first responders on safety and monitoring equipment is equivalent to a bomb waiting to explode.

Large city or larger communities with paid fire departments are far better off than the smaller departments. Some 70-80% of fire departments across the United States are manned by volunteers and many struggle to find volunteers to provide the services, let alone complete the requisite training. Many good hearted volunteers are not even clear about what their training requirements actually entail!

For those who have solid training coordinators and programs, the challenge is determining the best ways to deliver equipment training. The equipment is designed to detect and in some cases measure and identify materials that involve great risk, even in a training environment. Trainers often defer to using simulants that mimic the chemicals the meters are designed to detect, but many of the simulants commonly used are still hazardous chemicals in their own right!

> “In recent years, we have seen more training simulators introduced into the market.”

Simulators use frequencies and technologies to replace the use of actual chemical, biological and radiological materials. The obvious benefit is the simulators greatly reduce the risks associated with the use of live agents. Used properly, they can be a valuable training tool and can provide for a much more realistic training environment.

Simulators provide opportunities to train in ways we simply cannot do when we are using live agents. Anytime we utilize live agents, we have to consider who and what will be exposed, and any exposure at any level has inherent risks associated with it.

The use of simulators in training programs have real “value added” benefits. You eliminate the risks associated exposure, and provide a more realistic training environments while responders use their real equipment.

They also spend some serious "hands-on" time with the equipment and in environments that would be limited if they are using live agents.

The return on investment can be measured through metrics like fewer "operator errors", injuries, fatalities, reduced damage to detectors, avoidance of simulant and source related administration etc. and perhaps even lower insurance premiums when you present the training and qualifications for your program to your insurance providers. After all, premiums are based on the level of risk associated with the job. Reduce the risks through thorough training and you reduce that likelihood of your insurance broker having to pay out at some point.

It is easy for many political and government leaders to dismiss the need for investing in training when budgets are tight when they question how often their community really faces a terrorist threat involving chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear materials?

I cannot tell you how many times in my career I have heard, "That will never happen here", and frankly I pray it doesn't! But what about all the hazardous materials we find in our communities, plants, businesses, even hospitals and clinics have an assortment of highly toxic chemicals and materials on-site at any given time. And what about all the household chemicals we all have?Think about all the floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc. that can release a deluge of chemicals that absolutely should not come in contact with one another and some that should not come into contact with water.

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This isn't only a concern for your community, but for the legal challenges which are sure to follow. "Gross and wanton negligence" is not all that difficult to prove when you have little or insufficient training programs, first responders who are not competent or proficient in the use of the equipment, and standards and practices that are recognized across the country in both guidance and regulatory documents.

Government officials may think they are off the hook because they are above the law, but the one exemption to the legal protections they enjoy is, "gross and wanton negligence" and willful ignorance may not be far behind.

Ultimately, the decision-point and justification is quite simple. Are you willing to accept the risks associated with under-qualified personnel and insufficient training and capabilities, or should you consider moving toward ensuring you have sufficiently trained, equipped and qualified personnel to respond to the hazards that exist in the community.

WRITER BIO

Debra Robinson is the founder of 2O8 Consulting and Solutions and has more than 13 years of direct experience providing training and exercises in chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) and hazardous material response. Debra has trained many agencies within the United States including first and emergency responders, emergency management and hospital personnel, volunteers, senior government officials and warfighters including their specialized response teams.

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