



Best Practice Initiative

from the Assistant Secretary for Health
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services



Defense of Houston

Houston, Texas

(University of Texas Health Science Center, 2002)

Project Accomplishments

Defense of Houston began as a website, designed to help the Houston community prepare for terrorist attacks. Since then it has become the hub of a rapidly evolving information and education network for both antiterrorist efforts and natural disaster management. It has galvanized an extensive network of volunteers and has captured the imagination of the citizens of Houston. It has enhanced the reputations and recruiting abilities for the institutions which sponsor it and has become a role model for similar efforts around the country. It has also spawned new collaborative efforts among its member organizations and provides input for policy decisions to Houston's government.

Background

Prompted by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Defense of Houston was formed on September 16 as an ad hoc, self-appointed, but broadly representative committee of citizens who hope to optimize the city's preparation for disasters in general, and terrorism in particular. The group includes leaders of most industries, civic groups, government agencies, experts on natural disasters, terrorism, intelligence, diplomacy, biological and chemical threats, telecommunications, civil liberties, and emergency medical response. Predicting that the next problem would be an anthrax attack, the committee developed a website called www.defenseofhouston.org by September 18 to help the community prepare.

The Defense of Houston project builds on Disaster Relief and Emergency Medical Services (DREAMS) project, funded by the U.S. Army with expenditures of \$18 million to date and led by the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, Texas A&M University, Texas Health Institute, and Memorial Hermann Hospital. DREAMS tests the latest technologies for emergency care and seeks to improve emergency health response, whether in the military or in civilian life. This project provided funding for the website. That project has spurred the growth of the rest of the organization.

Goals

The goals of the project were to recognize, organize, and coordinate community activities, facilitate communication among leaders, provide reliable and timely information and skills to the public and to health professionals, and serve as a role model for similar organizations in other cities.

Core Components

Defense of Houston is presented on a Website, www.defenseofhouston.org. This is composed of different sections which may be updated and expanded over time as needed:

Disaster Relief and Emergency Medical Services (DREAMS). DREAMS itself consists of three broad efforts:

- Digital EMS (Emergency Medical Services) develops wireless video communications. Using continuous communication with these facilities and Houston's Intelligent Highway System, it combines GPS (Global Positioning System) technology and advanced software to enable ambulances and helicopters to reach the victim sooner, begin diagnosis and treatment on the scene, and coordinate helicopters and ambulances to minimize transport time to the nearest appropriate facility;
- Chemical Warfare Defense, and;
- STAT (Science Triage and Treatment), which funds research in the basic and applied sciences that will improve the diagnosis and treatment of tissue injuries.

There is a Discussion Board (password-protected for the use of the Advisory Board) that provides a secure, password-protected communication for rapid and wide brainstorming. Information on this site enables participants to recognize and prioritize opportunities for preparedness improvement.

Other components of the Website include a News Room (updated daily), links to other sources of information on terrorism (updated regularly), and information on anthrax, smallpox and other potential bioterror agents.

Defense of Houston is also the hub of an antiterrorism education network. Through this organization's efforts, more than 3,000 citizens have been exposed to a core curriculum on civil defense. An internship for public health students has begun, and medical residents and faculty are volunteering to work with the organization.

Future Programs

Collaborative efforts are underway with the Baylor College of Medicine and School of Public Health to develop a telehealth program. Plans are underway to convert this site to a bilingual status. A special site will be designed for blind users as well. The site will also provide alerts and information for natural disasters, such as floods or epidemics.

Results

- Over 1,500 volunteer hours have been donated by people from all walks of life including physicians, Ph.Ds., engineers, firefighters, stay-at-home mothers, and retirees.
- The DREAMS program began four years ago to deploy automatic external defibrillators (AEDs) in Houston. Over one hundred businesses, churches, civic groups, apartment houses, medical offices, and clubs have purchased these devices and provided training for their use.
- More than 3,000 citizens have been exposed to direct educational programs on civil defense.
- Thousands of Houstonians have been educated about the terrorism threat. Through media coverage, Defense of Houston has been able to reach over a million homes with information about defenses against terrorism.
- During periods of High Alert status, Defense of Houston is a source of information for the public and health professionals. During the Anthrax attacks of 2001, in response to telephone calls and media question, medical information about bioterrorist agents was provided on the website.
- Defense of Houston has succeeded in recognizing, organizing, and coordinating the activity of the community leaders and facilitating better communication between them. Our secure discussion board is a unique niche for conception of ideas, recognizing problems, and finding appropriate approaches to solve them. Our large collection of preparedness-related links has proved to be a useful portal for obtaining information on a wide variety of related subjects. We will conduct our first counter-bioterrorism exercise (EvilWind Exercise) in October 2002. It will simulate an outbreak of a terrorist-initiated lethal influenza epidemic in order to test our needs.
- We are developing an automated software engine which would be distributed nationwide to be used by other cities to make DefenseofMyCity.org models.
- Because of the interactions at our meetings, collaborative efforts for other projects are developing among members of our board and advisory group.
- Because of our efforts to empower Houstonians, our input on terrorism defense issues is sought by Houston's policy makers.

Lessons Learned

Relationships with local media (particularly television news programs) are critical to marketing efforts. The news media can also articulate the concerns of citizens. This information assists our development of curricula and the website. A high-visibility project such as Defense of Houston attracts volunteers from all walks of life. It is not always possible or appropriate for us to develop appropriate placements for these people. We have learned to be selective as we screen applicants. Persuading leaders to sign on is easy; persuading them to work is harder. Flexibility is critical. A website dealing with disasters must be updated quickly and frequently. In a rapidly changing environment, we must respond rapidly.

Further Information: www.defenseofhouston.org

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