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INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

Regional Distribution Site Exercise: Operation Basket Brigade, An Alternate Approach

SUMMARY

The *Lessons Learned Information Sharing (LLIS.gov)* team identifies innovative practices from the whole community and documents these practices to promote whole community learning and improvement. The information from this innovative practice was obtained through the DuPage County Health Department's (DCHD's) *Operation Basket Brigade After-Action Report* and interview. The DCHD leveraged its annual grant-required Regional Distribution Site (RDS) exercise to collect, inventory, package, and distribute food donations during Thanksgiving in lieu of simulated Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) medical materiel.¹ The exercise served as training for RDS staff and offered an example of how requirements and capabilities can be tested and expanded beyond the baseline exercise format.



DuPage County Health Department Operation Basket Brigade volunteers loading a truck with collected food donations. (Source: DuPage County Health Department)

DESCRIPTION

On November 25, 2013, the DCHD—located in Wheaton, Illinois—held its annual RDS exercise. The purpose of this exercise was to test and simulate the delivery of SNS medical materiel to local municipalities within the county. The DCHD expanded the basic grant requirements for the 2013 RDS exercise by turning the simulation into a food donation drive called "Operation Basket Brigade." The 2013 RDS exercise was a unified effort of community volunteers and participants from the DuPage County Sheriff's Office, DuPage County Office of Homeland Security, DuPage County Department of Transportation, and the DuPage County Health Department.

Community Engagement

Operation Basket Brigade cultivated and strengthened relationships between these organizations and developed new partnerships that could be used in the event of a real-world emergency. Strong community engagement was a key element of Operation Basket Brigade's success. Three months prior to the actual exercise, the DCHD worked with

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volunteers and staff to implement a community engagement strategy that was designed to make the local community aware of the food donation drive, increase community awareness of the RDS exercise and the SNS distribution process, solicit volunteers for the exercise, and increase the amount of donated food items. Activities for executing this strategy included:

- A public information campaign;
- Flyers posted in local stores and schools to raise awareness; and
- Food donation requests made to businesses.

During this engagement effort, individuals and businesses interested in making donations were asked to complete a commitment form on which they listed the food items they were giving. The form provided instructions on how to drop off donated items at the health department three days prior to exercise play. The robust engagement strategy performed during Operation Basket Brigade ensured there was ample time to procure an adequate supply of donated food to meet the community's assessed needs and an appropriate stockpile for effectively simulating the deployment of the SNS during the exercise.

Operation Basket Brigade Objectives

Operation Basket Brigade's specific objectives were designed to adhere to exercise standards and grant requirements. The objectives established by DCHD included:

- Activating and operating the RDS in accordance with the established procedures;
- Validating RDS Planning, including the generation of picklists, while also providing holiday baskets of food for 200 families in DuPage County;
- Managing both volunteers and donations to ensure operational success;²
- Establishing and maintaining communication between response venues to ensure a common operational picture;
- Ensuring the safety of all persons during the operation; and
- Providing unity of command tactically at the site and operationally at the area command post.³

With these objectives in mind, exercise play began after the food was collected. The exercise started with the mobilization of the RDS teams. The DCHD engaged internal volunteers and staff, as well as encouraged external volunteer coordination. The exercise created a training platform for staff to better understand RDS exercise processes using a hands-on approach centered around a commonly understood activity: a food donation drive. DCHD tested grant requirements and capabilities during Operation Basket Brigade by establishing and adhering to the exercise objectives, even as the exercise simultaneously served families in need across DuPage County.

RDS Operations Overview

When a public health emergency is declared, the state requests resources from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). To fulfill this request, the CDC sends a shipment of medical materiel to the state from the SNS. The SNS has large quantities of medicine and medical supplies that will protect Americans in the event of a public health emergency severe enough to deplete local supplies. When the requesting state receives supplies from the SNS, the state then distributes the supplies to local health departments. These health departments receive the supplies at a designated RDS, where the SNS materiel is inventoried, picked, re-packaged, and staged for pick up by municipalities. After the municipalities pick up supplies, the medical materiel is distributed to first responders. Operation Basket Brigade tested this system by using food donations as a substitute for SNS medical materiel.

(Sources: John Miller. Interview. February 20, 2014; Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response. October 15, 2012; Accessed on March 14, 2014. <http://www.cdc.gov/phpr/stockpile/stockpile.htm>.)

RDS Planning Validation

Operation Basket Brigade was executed in a manner designed to validate and simulate DCHD's RDS planning. For example, when local health departments receive the SNS from the state, they typically have a small window to ensure received medical materiel is inventoried, packaged, staged, and shipped. To ensure the replication and validation of this process was authentic, the government departments participating in Operation Basket Brigade provided exercise support in the same capacity that they would during a standard RDS exercise. Some of this support included:

- Securing the inventory;
- Providing assistance with staging; and
- Contacting local municipalities.⁴

Similarly, Operation Basket Brigade simulated the narrow window of time local health departments have between SNS materiel receipt and shipment. During the exercise, the DCHD started collecting food donations three days prior to the exercise using refrigerated trucks. When the exercise was initiated, the trucks holding the donated food items simulated the delivery of the SNS from the state to the local health department by transporting the food items to the designated RDS warehouse, where the food items were staged and inventoried. A pick list was generated to help staff determine the allocation of the donated food, and supplies were re-packaged and staged for pick up. Each of the steps were conducted using the same procedures that are used for medical materiel from the SNS. Municipalities picked up the baskets of food items, allowing the DCHD to simulate the pickup of first-responder medications during a real-world incident.

At the end of the exercise, DCHD found that modifying the exercise into a food drive enabled engagement with volunteers, staff, and external community partners—such as local grocery stores—at all levels of participation. The steps used during the exercise did not deviate from a standard exercise approach and added the creative element of incorporating a community food drive. Because of this, Operation Basket Brigade successfully validated RDS requirements and delivered food to families in need.

APPLICABILITY

Operation Basket Brigade took a traditional RDS exercise and added a community engagement piece to it that went beyond the basic grant requirements for the exercise. The exercise demonstrated that going beyond the minimum requirements and expanding the scope of the exercise can help build new relationships, strengthen existing ones, and engage communities prior to a real-world event. Additionally, adding creative elements to the exercise made it an interactive learning experience for all participants. It also helped staff and volunteers better remember the parts of the RDS process. Replicating the practices of Operation Basket Brigade in other RDS exercises could enable more agencies to test and validate various emergency preparedness plans while simultaneously addressing other community needs.

This exercise was conducted under the design and control of the DCHD's Office of Risk and Emergency Management. Additional information about the exercise can be requested from the Exercise Director, John Miller. He may be reached by email at jmiller@dupagehealth.org.

CITATIONS

¹ John Miller, Emergency Response Coordinator. Personal Interview. February 20, 2014.

² John Miller. DuPage County Health Department. Operation: Basket Brigade After Action Report/Improvement Plan. 2013.
https://www.ilis.dhs.gov/system/files/OperationBasketBrigade_AAR.121212.pdf

³ John Miller. Personal Interview. February 20, 2014.

⁴ John Miller. Operation: Basket Brigade After Action Report/Improvement Plan. 2013.