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LESSON LEARNED

Emergency Public Information: Assigning Public Information Officers to Mass Decontamination Sites

SUMMARY

Incident commanders (ICs) should assign public information officers (PIOs) to mass decontamination sites to ensure that victims, the media, and the public receive accurate and consistent information.

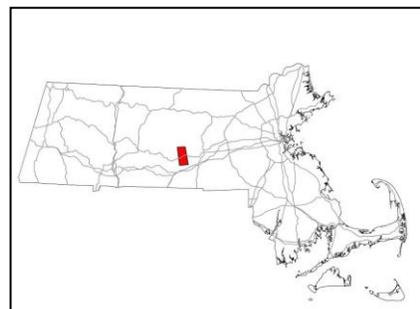
DESCRIPTION

On April 25, 2007, a malfunction caused the accidental release of a large amount of sodium hydroxide into the Spencer, Massachusetts, drinking water system. The system's pumps pushed the heavily contaminated water into the drinking water distribution system of Spencer before water department operators realized that an accident had occurred. Department operators notified local emergency response agencies of the contamination only 2 hours after the release. Approximately 145 residents of the town experienced skin burns and/or irritations due to exposure to the contaminated water.

A Spencer Fire Department chief declared a mass-casualty incident and established incident command soon after the sodium hydroxide release was discovered. Personnel from 5 state agencies, 6 local emergency management agencies, 5 boards of health, 14 fire departments, 3 law enforcement agencies, and 36 ambulance units participated in the ensuing response operations.

Following the release, personnel from the Spencer, East Brookfield, and Brookfield fire departments set up decontamination stations at Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester and at the East Brookfield Fire Station. These personnel registered, assisted, and provided victims with instructions during the decontamination process. Response personnel at these stations successfully decontaminated approximately 100 people throughout the 3-day response.

The [Spencer Water Department](#) is responsible for delivering water to Spencer's businesses and 11,000 residents. Water department personnel routinely add a small amount of sodium hydroxide to the water to raise the pH level. Sodium hydroxide is a corrosive chemical that, if swallowed, can cause severe burns of mouth, throat, and stomach and death. Damage may appear days after exposure. In addition, contact with skin can cause irritation, severe burns, and scarring.



**Location of the town of
Spencer in central
Worcester County, MA**

During response operations, command personnel did not assign PIOs to coordinate public information activities at the mass decontamination stations. Consequently, decontamination personnel could not easily access all relevant information to answer some of the victims' inquiries. In several instances, response personnel provided victims, the media, and the public with contradictory or incorrect information. The lack of PIOs at decontamination sites caused confusion and undermined the effective coordination and dissemination of information to victims and the media during response operations. Further, the after-action report observes that command personnel should ensure that decontamination personnel do not provide information to the media during operations.

ICs should assign PIOs to mass decontamination sites to ensure that victims, the media, and the public receive accurate and consistent information.

CITATIONS

Blue Ribbon Committee. *The Report of the Blue Ribbon Committee on the Water Emergency of April 25-27, 2007 in Spencer, Massachusetts*. 01 Sep 2007.

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