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## LESSON LEARNED

### Emergency Public Information: Maintaining Updated Emergency Contact Information for Local Media

#### SUMMARY

Public information officers (PIOs) should develop a list of emergency contact information for local media personnel and include it in the emergency public information (EPI) annex or plan. PIOs should update the contact information regularly. This will help to ensure that PIOs can provide accurate information to the media during incidents.

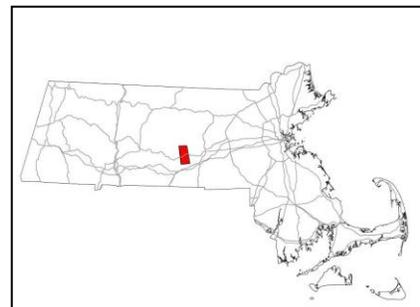
#### DESCRIPTION

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.

Throughout the 3-day response, response agencies employed multiple means to alert and inform Spencer's residents of changes in incident conditions. Spencer and Southbridge fire department personnel acquired sign boards from adjacent jurisdictions and programmed them to display a "do not use water" message. Response personnel then placed the boards along Spencer's main routes. In addition, sheriff's and fire department personnel conducted door-to-door notifications and distributed flyers to schools and other public facilities during response operations. Finally, during the response, emergency management

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**

and response personnel participated in press conferences and coordinated the release of public information with the local media. Sign boards, press conferences, and flyers directed residents to access the town of Spencer's Web site, which was updated throughout the duration of response operations.

At the onset of response operations, command personnel could not disseminate critical alerts to some members of the local media. The EPI annex of Spencer's Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) did not include updated emergency contact information for all local media. Immediately after the incident, response personnel could not contact some local newspapers because the incident occurred before many of these newspapers' branch offices opened for business. In some instances, response personnel had to leave messages on answering machines to alert the newspapers of the release. The after action report recommends that emergency managers review and update the Spencer's CEMP EPI annex regularly. This annex should include an updated list of emergency contact information for all the local media.

The "Means of Dissemination" section of the FEMA's *Guide for All-Hazard Emergency Operations Planning* states that the EPI annex should describe the main public information dissemination means that a jurisdiction can employ following an incident. This can include the Emergency Alert System (EAS); television, radio, and cable outlets not participating in the EAS; and newspapers and specially printed material. The annex also should include points of contact.

PIOs should develop a list of emergency contact information for local media personnel and include it in the EPI annex or plan. PIOs should update the contact information regularly. This will help to ensure that PIOs can provide accurate information to the media during incidents.

### 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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