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LESSON LEARNED

Emergency Public Information: Designating a Single Spokesperson During Extended Response Operations

SUMMARY

Incident commanders should designate, when feasible, only one spokesperson for the duration of an extended anthrax or hazardous materials (HazMat) response. This can help ensure consistent dissemination of critical information to the public and the media throughout response operations.

DESCRIPTION

On December 24, 2009, Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) medical personnel diagnosed a 24-year-old female patient with gastrointestinal anthrax. Several weeks prior to the onset of symptoms, the patient had participated in a "drumming circle" in Durham, New Hampshire. Seventy-two people had attended the 2-hour drumming event at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) United Campus Ministry (UCM) community center. During the event, participants had played 59 drums and inadvertently caused anthrax spores on some animal-hide drums to aerosolize. The patient then ingested the aerosolized anthrax spores.

Between December 2009 and April 2010, 7 federal, 19 state, and 23 local agencies participated in the ensuing epidemiological investigation, prophylaxis activities, and remediation and recovery operations. The NH Department of Health and Human Services (NHDHHS) incident management team (IMT) assumed command and control of the incident. In addition, the NH Department of Safety, Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management; the National Guard 12th Civil Support Team; and the NH Department of Environmental Services, among others, supported response operations.

NHDHHS personnel identified, contacted, and interviewed approximately 210 people who were at or near UNH UCM at the time of the event. This included 168 UCM visitors, 2 overnight guests, 4 workers, 28 volunteers, and 8 residents. Following this investigation, NHDHHS staff offered anthrax prophylaxis to 84 potentially exposed people. In addition, NHDHHS Division of Public Health Services, NH Department of Environmental Services, and NH National Guard 12th Civil Support Team personnel conducted environmental sampling at UNH UCM and at the patient's residence. Finally, these personnel tested approximately 30

Anthrax is an infectious disease caused by *Bacillus anthracis* bacteria. The 2009 New Hampshire incident represented the first gastrointestinal anthrax case recorded in the United States.

The anthrax detected on the drums that participants played on December 4, 2009, was a naturally occurring strain that frequently appears in soil. Animals can ingest contaminated soil and pass the anthrax bacteria to people who handle their hides.

drums to determine the possible source and level of anthrax contamination. Two drums and three UCM electrical outlets tested positive and had to be disposed of.

During the response, NHDHHS coordinated the dissemination of information to the media and the public with public information officers (PIOs) of responding agencies. However, the lead spokesperson assigned to disseminate public information changed three times during this response due to the length of response operations. Each new assignment required that PIOs brief the new spokesperson extensively on the incident and on messaging procedures. The lack of a single spokesperson hindered the ability of response agencies to deliver consistent information to the public and the media during the extended anthrax response. The after action report notes that, if possible, the IMT should identify one spokesperson from the onset of response operations. This can help ensure that the media and the public receive consistent information throughout an event.

For additional information on identifying and selecting spokespersons, please also refer to the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice [Crisis Communications Planning: Pre-Identifying, Training, and Selecting Spokespeople](#).

Incident commanders should designate, when feasible, only one spokesperson for the duration of an extended anthrax or HazMat response. This can help ensure consistent dissemination of critical information to the public and the media throughout response operations.

CITATIONS

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