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PRIMARY DISCIPLINES

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LESSON LEARNED

Site Evaluation Equipment

SUMMARY

First on scene fire units should be equipped with basic, low-tech Hazardous Materials (HazMat) detection equipment. Having such equipment will help avoid unnecessary delays in potential life-saving operations and in the overall response.

DESCRIPTION

First arriving units at the scene of a mock radiological attack during the Top Officials 2 (TOPOFF 2) exercise in Chicago, Illinois encountered delays in site evaluation and reconnaissance. Site entry was subsequently deferred, and victims of the attack did not receive prompt medical care as a result.

The first on-scene units were not equipped with basic, low-tech chemical and nuclear detection equipment. Without the ability to quickly evaluate the scene, these units followed standard protocols for site evaluation and waited for a full-scene analysis by a HazMat team. This led to "an unacceptable delay of scene reconnaissance and visible victim rescue," according to the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) TOPOFF 2 after-action report (AAR). First-on-scene personnel watched "victims" die in the open during this delay of response, which, when HazMat crews did arrive and declared the scene free of harmful materials, proved unnecessary.

Costly delays in scene evaluation and victim care could have been avoided with a more rapid assessment of hazards. The AAR recommended that all fire and HazMat units receive basic, low-tech chemical and nuclear detection and monitoring equipment such as:

- M-8 Paper and HazMat SMART Strips for detecting chemical nerve and blister agents, and
- Basic Nuclear Alarm Devices for detecting radiological and nuclear agents.

This low-tech equipment will "allow first-in units to rapidly assess a potential terrorist attack event for dangerous hazards," according to the AAR.

The Illinois Statewide Emergency Response (ISER) community now requires all member emergency response vehicles to be equipped with basic HazMat detection gear. ISER first-on-scene responders are now able to quickly conduct site safety reconnaissance rather than having to wait for fully equipped Hazmat teams.

CITATION

Mutual Aid Box Alarm System. *TOPOFF II Supplemental Report*. May 15, 2003.
(http://firechief.com/newsitems/firefighting_illinois_mabas_issues/)

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