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GOOD STORY

Los Angeles County, California, Department of Public Health's Weapons of Mass Destruction Technical Advisory Group

SUMMARY

The Los Angeles County, California, Department of Public Health (DPH) partnered with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Los Angeles Field Office to develop and launch the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Technical Advisory Group (TAG). The group serves as an early detection mechanism for public health and law enforcement personnel to share and mutually assess health and medical information that may have a nexus to terrorism or may suggest an emerging terror threat.

BACKGROUND

The 2001 anthrax attacks demonstrated to Los Angeles County DPH officials the need to enhance bioterrorism recognition and response capabilities. DPH's Emergency Preparedness and Response Program (EPRP) worked to develop a secure mechanism to share information and to jointly assess emerging threats with the FBI Los Angeles Field Office. DPH was aware that the FBI could have information or intelligence that could help DPH personnel identify public health threats. Similarly, Los Angeles County DPH personnel could obtain information during their normal activities that, if shared, could aid in FBI bioterrorism investigations. DPH wished to leverage staff expertise to allow for joint assessments. Further, DPH wanted to create a direct channel of communication with the FBI to better share threat information. In 2005, DPH established the TAG in partnership with the Los Angeles FBI Field Office to enhance information sharing and joint assessments.

GOALS

The TAG assists law enforcement personnel in the early detection and credibility assessment of health-related threats through:

- Recognizing, interpreting, and assessing medical and epidemiological intelligence information obtained by law enforcement or public health personnel, which may suggest an emerging terrorist threat;
- Assisting law enforcement personnel in determining the credibility of a threat;
- Providing real-time consultation to on-scene field operations;
- Recommending further actions that may clarify or mitigate the health or medical aspect of a possible terrorist threat.

DESCRIPTION

The TAG is a partnership between the Los Angeles County DPH, the FBI Los Angeles Field Office, and the Joint Regional Intelligence Center (JRIC). The TAG is composed of DPH medical and epidemiological experts as well as the FBI Los Angeles Field Office WMD

coordinator. The group activates as needed to assess health-related threats, to assist in determining their credibility and potential nexus to terrorism, and to initiate joint DPH-FBI investigations, if warranted.

Development

In 2005, DPH, in connection with the Los Angeles FBI Field Office WMD coordinator, developed a model outlining the main responsibilities of the TAG, the group's membership, its activation procedures, and its structure. The FBI provided TAG members with security clearances that allow TAG members access to relevant classified information.

DPH worked with the FBI Los Angeles Field Office and Los Angeles Sheriff's Department to create a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on conducting joint DPH-FBI bioterrorism investigations. The MOU outlines information sharing processes and describes the types of information that can be shared between the agencies during joint investigations. The MOU was signed in December 2005.

TAG Responsibilities

The TAG operates as a component of DPH's EPRP. The TAG supports:

- Conducting credibility assessments of health and medical threat intelligence;
- Providing real-time consultation to on-scene field operations in collaboration with relevant DPH programs;
- Providing health threat prediction, mitigation, and investigation strategies;
- Notifying the DPH health officer and appropriate DPH program chiefs of emerging threats;
- Initiating the decision for a joint DPH-FBI investigation.

TAG Coordinator

The TAG coordinator is appointed by the director of Los Angeles County DPH. Currently, the DPH director of threat assessment for the EPRP serves as the TAG coordinator. The coordinator has the authority to activate the TAG and to determine which TAG members should participate in a specific conference call. The coordinator is responsible for facilitating TAG conference calls, ensuring that security measures are maintained throughout the call, and working closely with the FBI Los Angeles Field Office WMD coordinator and the JRIC medical intelligence analyst.

TAG Members

The TAG coordinator appoints TAG personnel, drawing from DPH programs (with the exception of the FBI Los Angeles Field Office WMD coordinator). TAG members include:

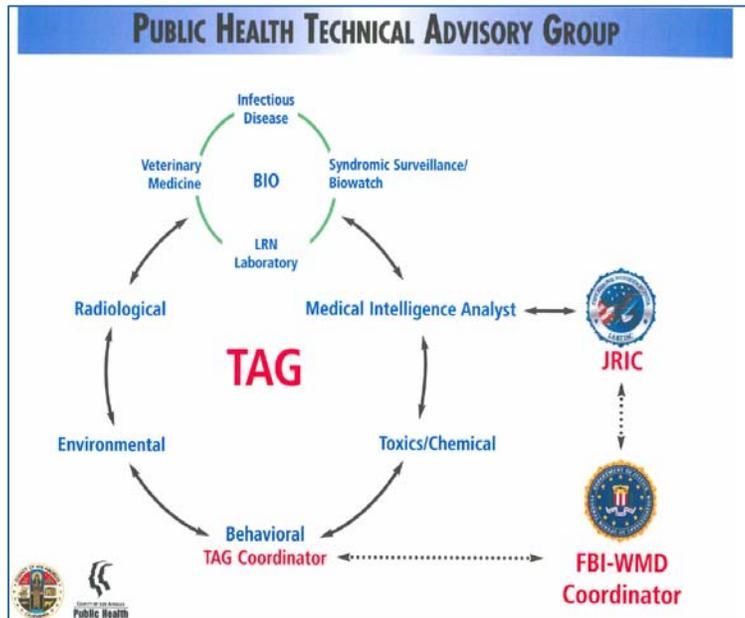
- Behavioral analyst (psychiatrist)
- Bioterrorism lab coordinator
- Infectious disease and medical epidemiologists (3)
- Director, Los Angeles County EPRP
- Environmental health experts (2)
- JRIC public health WMD medical intelligence analyst
- Medical toxicologist
- Los Angeles FBI Field Office WMD coordinator
- Radiation expert
- Veterinarian

FBI Collaboration

The FBI Los Angeles Field Office WMD coordinator serves as the FBI's main point-of-contact for the TAG. The WMD coordinator and TAG coordinator function as a team and regularly share threat information with one another. This allows the TAG to share and mutually assess both public health and law enforcement WMD threat information.

Fusion Center Collaboration

DPH has detailed public health personnel to the JRIC to function as public health WMD intelligence analysts. These individuals alert the TAG coordinator of developing health threats and provide the TAG with relevant information and intelligence. The TAG coordinator, likewise, alerts the JRIC WMD intelligence analysts to health information with a potential nexus to terrorism.



TAG schematic

TAG Activation

DPH, FBI, or JRIC personnel can request a TAG activation through their agency's representative on the TAG (the TAG coordinator, the Los Angeles County FBI Field Office WMD coordinator, or the JRIC WMD intelligence analyst, respectively). The TAG coordinator determines whether an activation is warranted. A full TAG activation includes all members, while a partial activation includes only those members whose expertise is relevant to the call. Once notified, TAG members convene over a conference call. However, if there is a need to discuss classified information, members will meet in a secure location.

Utilizing the TAG

The TAG has provided subject-matter expertise to emergency responders and law enforcement personnel, facilitating information sharing during both actual incidents and multi-agency exercises. As a result, the TAG has assisted in threat assessments in a timely and accurate manner.

For example, in 2006, DPH activated the TAG in response to a potential Los Angeles County reservoir breach. The TAG provided information to local hazardous material personnel regarding the types of biological or chemical agents that could survive the reservoir's water purification system. The TAG also provided instructions on how to sample and test the water for the presence of these agents. Ultimately, the TAG determined that there was no credible threat to Los Angeles County's water supply. This demonstrated the ability of the TAG to leverage the expertise of its members to accurately assess a threat situation in "real time."

In April 2007, DPH and the FBI Los Angeles Field Office hosted a 1-day, full-scale exercise (FSE) simulating the release of a biological agent in Los Angeles. The FSE tested the DPH-FBI MOU by focusing on information sharing capabilities and procedures. Fifty FBI and fifty public health personnel participated in the FSE, which took place at three Los Angeles

County hospitals. During the FSE, three TAG members worked at the FBI Los Angeles Joint Operations Center, and three FBI agents worked at the DPH Department Operations Center. The TAG activated, which led to the decision to initiate a joint DPH-FBI investigation.

REQUIREMENTS

Keys to Success

Collaboration of Experts

The TAG relies on the subject-matter expertise of its members for accurate and timely analysis of a wide range of health threats. Participation from these specialized experts enhances the scope and effectiveness of the TAG.

Agency Partnerships

The DPH relies on its strong relationship with the FBI Los Angeles Field Office, which has supported the development and operations of the TAG. This partnership has resulted in the joint assessment of potential threats to public health.

Links

FBI Los Angeles Field Office

<http://losangeles.fbi.gov/>

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

<http://www.lapublichealth.org/>

Los Angeles JRIC

<https://www.lajric.com/index.htm>

REFERENCES

TAG Presentation at the DHS Health Security Intelligence Workshop, given by Dickson Diamond, M.D. Director of Threat Assessment, Emergency Preparedness and Response Program, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. 14 Oct 2008.

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