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Emergency Response Training in California: Piloting the Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response Operations Course in a Local Environmental Health Department

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Editor's Note:

NEHA strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature this column on environmental health services from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the *Journal*.

In these columns, authors from CDC's Water, Food, and Environmental Health Services Branch, as well as guest authors, will share insights and information about environmental health programs, trends, issues, and resources. The conclusions in these columns are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of CDC.

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In fall 2017, San Diego County, with assistance from the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), presented three sessions of the Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response Operations (EHTER Ops) course in a novel 2-day version. Until then, EHTER Ops had been offered exclusively at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP) in Anniston, Alabama, as a 4-day resident course. EHTER Ops is a course that prepares participants to assess disaster-related environmental health conditions and perform tasks in a hands-on and field team

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focused approach. The course emphasizes the use of field equipment and instrumentation, including personal protective equipment (PPE), under disaster conditions. EHTER Ops is a companion to the EHTER Awareness Level course.

California has a decade of experience with the EHTER Awareness Level course. A 2-day, state-specific version of EHTER Awareness has been provided through a partnership between CDPH and host counties since 2008. To date, nearly 2,000 environmental health and other responders have been trained through 36 EHTER Awareness sessions. Success of the California EHTER Awareness Level course is due to a large registered environmental health specialist (REHS) workforce who have been eager for this type of training. Nationwide, thousands of environmental health professionals and other responders have successfully completed EHTER Awareness and Operations Level courses through various delivery mechanisms (i.e., resident/classroom-based, independent study/online trainings) offered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and FEMA/CDP.

A California version of EHTER Ops began taking shape in summer 2017 when CDPH arranged for more than two dozen state agency and local jurisdiction representatives to attend a CDP train-the-trainer version of the course. That cohort included San Diego County Department of Environmental Health representatives who had already incorporated EHTER Awareness Level course concepts into their staff development program. After the train-the-trainer experience and many months of planning, three 2-day EHTER Ops pilot sessions were presented in October 2017 using an earthquake as the disaster scenario.

Some adjustments and innovations were made to the original EHTER Ops format: less time in the classroom, more time with equipment at skill building stations (Photo 1), the addition of a departmental operations center that controlled team movements and tracked their progress, and an all-day field deployment on day 2 that sent teams to a now vacant former children's home (Photo 2). The teams responded to a mass feeding operation that had experienced a power outage and water supply disruption, assessed health and safety conditions at an emergency shelter (Photo 3), evaluated a damaged residential facility for reoccupancy, and identified safety and health hazards at a hazardous materials facility.

Instructional support was provided by San Diego County environmental health staff, as well as state university representatives who had attended the CDP train-the-trainer.

Selected environmental health specialists from outside San Diego County were invited to attend a pilot session in an effort to encourage other jurisdictions to begin planning their own EHTER Ops session. Evaluations from pilot session participants were overwhelmingly positive as the course offered an interesting opportunity to work together under realistic conditions using equipment they might have been unfamiliar with, all while having some fun. The San Diego EHTER Ops demonstration showed that a 2-day format can work provided that participants have had the basic EHTER Awareness Level course and that a suitable training location is available. For future EHTER Ops sessions, CDPH plans to work with FEMA/CDP and California universities as their campuses offer the potential for a variety of training venues, as well as instructional space and support. A big thank you to all who helped make the EHTER Ops pilot sessions a success!

FEMA is currently working with CDC and state environmental health programs to develop a just-in-time training package that will help environmental health professionals maintain their disaster response and recovery capabilities and assist them in situations when specific environmental health sector training is needed (e.g., shelters, food safety, vectors and pests). It is anticipated that this package will be ready for delivery sometime in 2019. For more information on EHTER training opportunities, please visit www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/elearn/ehter.htm.

Biographies



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Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) Timeline of Success

- **July 2006:** First delivery of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) EHTER Awareness Level course at NEHA's 70th Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition.
- **February and June 2008:** Delivery of EHTER Train-the-Trainer courses in Sacramento, California, and Tucson, Arizona.
- **March 2009:** Delivery of CDC's EHTER Awareness Level course expanded through a partnership with the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP) in Anniston, Alabama.
- **June 2010:** First delivery of an international EHTER course through a collaboration between CDC, the Pan American Health Organization, and the Caribbean Environmental Health Initiative at the 5th Annual Caribbean Environmental Forum & Exhibition in Jamaica.
- **August 2012:** Delivery of CDC's EHTER Awareness Level course expanded through a partnership with CDC University.
- **September 2014:** First delivery of the EHTER Operations course at FEMA/ CDP.
- **October 2017:** EHTER Awareness Level is launched as an online independent-study course through FEMA's Emergency Management Institute.

The EHTER Operations course continues to be improved and expanded upon based on student feedback and partner engagement. For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/elearn/ehter.htm.



Photo 1. Skill building stations allow participants to practice using radios and field guides.



Photo 2.
Course participants assess a children’s residential facility for reoccupancy.



Photo 3.
The team briefs the shelter manager on assessment findings.