For Immediate Release

MECCA 911 contributes radiation detection devices to MCHD Threat Prep

MORGANTOWN, WV (Oct. 9, 2018) — When a radiograph truck carrying a device used to take X-rays of oil and gas pipelines crashed in Ritchie County this summer, an observant first responder noticed the radiological symbol on a machine that had fallen onto the road and proceeded to clear the area.

By doing so, he avoided injury to himself as well as bystanders, and a team was brought in to deal with the device.

“It’s something we’re seeing more of in West Virginia, especially in an accidental scenario,” said Jimmy Smith, director of MECCA 911 and Emergency Management in Monongalia County, which recently contributed radiation detection devices to Monongalia County Health Department’s Threat Preparedness program.

“In the oil and gas industry, they use these sources. There have been some accidents and there has been radioactive material detected at those accidents.”

Industrial radiography is in wide use in the region because of the oil and gas business, said Jamie Moore, MCHD’s regional Threat Prep coordinator.

“Radiation materials are regulated by the federal government in its shipment and location,” Moore added. “Everything has to be accounted for, with identification on the package and/or the vehicle that’s traveling with it.”

Radioactive items are transported daily, added Smith and Mike Fortney, assistant director of Emergency Management. Another example is nuclear medicine that hospitals use when conducting positron emission tomography (PET) scans.
Some high-energy sources are potent enough to warrant an armed security forces, Moore said. “The possibility of an individual coming into contact with radiation is quite low just because it’s so regulated,” Moore added.

But accidents do happen, so it is important that first responders know how to protect themselves.

That’s why radiation detection devices contributed by MECCA 911 and Emergency Management to MCHD Threat Prep are so important.

Through a joint effort between the United States Department of Homeland Security’s Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD) Office and MECCA 911, Fortney was able to support the planning to detect and respond to radioactive or nuclear material found outside of regulatory control. MECCA 911 was also able to procure three different types of radiation detection devices that MCHD’s Threat Preparedness program will use for training and real-world deployments.

“If a public safety person that’s been trained and knows what these materials look like sees something, notification is made to get trained people out to determine, is it or isn’t it radioactive?” Fortney said. “If it isn’t, the road gets opened up. If it is, you have to get it contained and start the cleanup.”

Devices that MCHD Threat Prep will use for training include one neutron isotope detector that can work underwater or on land; five handheld radiation monitors and 23 personal radiation detectors (PRDs). All items can be used to help detect if an item found in an incident emits radioactivity.

“The goal is not just to have the radiation equipment here but also in the field so first responders can build a level of safety if they come in contact with a potential radiation source,” Moore said.

Not only can the devices detect radioactivity, but measurements also can be taken that help responders determine how far away people need to stay and what length of time they can be in the area of radioactivity, Moore said.

Moore noted that the devices will be a big help to support radiation response capabilities, augmenting capabilities of both ongoing chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defense (CBRNE) training that MCHD Threat Prep sponsors and conducts, as well as the Community Radiation Response Team. The latter is a cache of equipment that is deployed by the West Virginia Center for Threat Preparedness that is used to train and equip partners throughout the region to respond to radiation events.
“We’ve had several years of training with other first responders and even some volunteers to build up our ability to respond to radiation events,” Moore said. “It’s evolving from bringing people together for the trainings and seeing the need to having a more coordinated community-based response effort.”

In mid-June, Moore attended a weeklong training in Radiation Emergency Medicine at the Radiation Emergency Assistance Center/Training Site (REAC/TS) in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, to learn more about conducting radiation drills and responding to radiation events. Upon returning, he coordinated a Technical Materials Emergency Radiation Response Transportation Training (T-MERRTT) for MCHD employees and area first responders.

Dr. Lee B. Smith, county health officer and MCHD’s executive director, also recently attended weeklong radiation emergency medicine training at REAC/TS. He noted that MCHD trains not only first responders but also staff in radiation detection through the Radiation Response Team that was created in 2015 by the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources and located at MCHD.

“We are fortunate to have sophisticated scientific equipment not only for radon but for other radioactive isotopes as well,” Smiths said. “With this commitment to training and equipment, we stand ready to protect the public and prevent problems and promote radiation education.”

For more information on MCHD, check out monchd.org and follow us on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD for up-to-date information on health and safety.

—30—