

May 2009

LEPC Hits 20

The federal government required local communities to begin serious planning for possible chemical emergencies with the "SuperFund" SARA legislation. One of the sections of this regulation is called *Emergency Planning and Community Right To Know*. Kent County's Local Emergency Planning Committee, LEPC, formed in 1989 and is working ambitiously to write and test hundreds of emergency response plans all over the county.

What is LEPC?

Because Congress required local communities to recognize the citizens' *right to know* about dangerous substances nearby, firefighters, law enforcement officers, industry employees, special needs advocates, environmental scientists, teachers and school administrators, emergency medical services, hospitals, the Red Cross, news media, and emergency managers all are represented on the Kent County LEPC. Each member serves a valuable function.



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May 4th is Chemical Awareness Week Dozens of Simulations

The Kent County LEPC, working within the Sheriff Department's Emergency Management Division, helps to oversee a simulated emergency each May during Chemical Awareness Week. These annual tests are broad-based and sometimes

quite imaginative, pulling in several area police, fire, and medical first-response units along with specialized hazardous materials response teams to terrible situations involving mock Terrorist attacks or industrial accidents that may go far beyond realistic expectation. These tests have covered all types of chemical-using facilities over the past 20 years, including metropolitan factory and food processing locations, as well as simulated chemical releases at orchards and farms.

In addition, the Sheriff's Department organizes or participates in several more emergency simulations or "table top exercises" throughout each year. Area hospitals, to maintain their accreditation, must perform their own emergency simulations at least twice each year involving "victims" and other agencies, trying to uncover critical weaknesses that can be overcome before any actual need may arise.

Literally, every few weeks, some organization somewhere in Kent County is "exercising its plan" so as to be prepared.



Kent County's HazMat Teams

In addition to the three Kent County certified HazMat teams operated with area fire departments, several major industrial operations in Kent County have established their own, on-site, Emergency Response Teams. The LEPC's Emergency Response Plans also list trained contractors who may be called to assist the First Responders. Area emergency medical providers have personnel trained in hazardous material response to provide emergency care and victim transportation. All area acute care hospitals have decontamination facilities, too.

Incidents Are Few for Chemical Release

The chance of any citizen actually ending up severely hurt or even killed by a chemical release is quite small. The process of registering with the local LEPC and cooperating on developing emergency plans brings Safety into sharp focus for most users of Extremely Hazardous Substances, be they chemical companies or fruit orchards.

Actual numbers start with zero. *No one has died or even been seriously injured in a chemical emergency locally.*

There have been few such incidents in the Kent County/Grand Rapids metro area. The average is less than one per year.

There was an Anhydrous Ammonia release at the Delphi plant in April 2008. Two incidents in 2007 included a Sulfuric Acid spill at Michigan Wire's Plant Number Two and a release of Sulfur Dioxide at the Wyoming Clean Water Plant. The biggest public disruption occurred in 2003, 6 years ago, in the city of Grand Rapids with an acid spill at the Haviland chemical plant. Even though the liquid was contained within the plant, the vapor and mists became airborne and traveled with the wind which is why it was treated as a large enough event that some area Broadcasters even won industry awards for coverage of this "breaking news".



JARGON JERKY

Translating Abbreviations

EHS

Extremely Hazardous Substances

Chemicals capable of being airborne that the government considers particularly dangerous.

HAZMAT

Hazardous Material

HAZWOPER

Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response Act setting government safety standards.

SARA

Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act

Informally used to mean the federal law establishing the entire system of chemical awareness and safety planning/response. SARA actually amended a bigger program called CERCLA (Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act) which is the basic "SuperFund" Congress made to deal with hazardous chemical pollution.

MSDS

Material Safety Data Sheet

Paperwork explaining the hazards of the stuff you work with

RQ

Reportable Quantity

The amount of spilled hazardous chemical that must be reported at a location.

TPQ

Threshold Planning Quantity

The amount of an Extremely Hazardous Chemical that triggers LEPC planning action.



Change We Can Live With Making Our World Safer

Focusing on Chemical Safety found some organizations learning to save money and operate more efficiently. The emergency management websites and newsletters are filled with quotes from industrial managers who have learned it is not only public-spirited, but cost justifiably wise to employ a Risk Aversion Manager on-staff, watching for situations that might lead to possible emergencies and being prepared to deal with even small incidents before they become out of hand.

Additionally, many organizations that rely on the use of chemicals the federal government has described as Extremely Hazardous Substances have discovered safer alternatives to the assumed need to handle these in the first place. A prime example is found at most municipal waste water operations. For instance, the city of Grand Rapids had routinely parked a railroad tank car full of chlorine gas not far off Market Street where it fed the bacteria killing water purification treatments. A few years ago, that "EHS" was replaced effectively with Sodium Hypochlorite which is used in conjunction with ultraviolet radiation (UV lights) to kill bacteria without the previous risk.

Your Right to Know!

This is federal law.

The entire LEPC organization is based on the Congress' desire to support the fact that you have a right to know about the Hazardous- and Extremely Hazardous Chemicals in your community. "Title III" of the 1986 SARA (Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act) is the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA). This is the actual law that requires local governments to make this information public, to include all manner of special interest groups (even news reporters) to help write and oversee these sensitive plans, and, in effect, to "spread safety".

What is in a Plan?

Emergency Response Plans are written with the whole community in mind although each Plan is quite detailed toward the specific organization preparing for a possible chemical emergency. In 2008, a total of 241 Plans were approved; 237 of these (98%) were revised. Since the inception of the program, more than 295 plans have been completed for the Kent LEPC. Grand Rapids city's own LEPC has 42 active plans, each of which is the size of a small book.



In keeping with federal guidelines, each Plan details the amount of each particular chemical that emergency personnel such as firefighters may encounter in a facility, pinpoints the storage locations and provides details on the facility's own safety equipment and structural features. The Plan contains telephone numbers and other contact information for the facility's executives and emergency technicians.

Moving beyond the immediate location, each Plan examines the neighborhood surrounding the area to find what type of buildings are there: homes or other industries? Schools? Creeks? Are any particular "special needs" groups, such as nursing homes or daycare centers, located nearby? If a chemical release were to occur, would it run down the sewer or be wafted aloft by the wind? How far would such a plume reach before being diluted to a safe concentration? Which waterways might be impacted?

How would people in that area be instructed to deal with a possible emergency? Should they hunker down to "Shelter In Place" or evacuate? And in which direction? Which roads would be most accommodating?

How should the information be spread to the public to begin with? Which community sirens should sound? Which Radio or TV stations should be contacted?

All these myriad questions have been answered in great detail in each Plan. That information is provided to the First Response agencies near the plant, farm or other facility. Battalion Fire Chiefs or "Incident Commanders" have studied each of the plans in their areas and know which pages to consult in an emergency.

While Emergency Response Plans are the size of small books with maps, charts and tables, fewer actually are being printed. With the cooperation of the federal and state Homeland Security, DEQ, MSP and other agencies, the Plans are filed on the Internet and available on the Incident Commander's wireless laptop computer for quick searches at the scene of an event. Where wireless broadband access is an issue, the LEPC distributes and updates disc-based versions of the latest Plans.

How to Stay Safe

Kent County's LEPC has given considerable study to safety advice for people who may be caught in an unfortunate accident. Having your own Plan is very important. Know where you might go if you need to evacuate. While most of us have extra provisions in the house (especially during the blizzard months!) you would be well-advised to have a "Shelter In Place" kit to seal your house if the emergency personnel believe that would be most effective. Such a "kit" might consist of little more than several big sheets of plastic sheeting and a roll of duct tape. The Kent County LEPC has instructions on-line for setting up your own Shelter kit. It includes other things you might want to think of.

Kent County is among the State's Leading LEPCs

The original SARA legislation establishing LEPC organizations did not provide the money to pay for them. Local communities were on their own to decide how to implement this. Kent County initially housed the LEPC within the Health Department and, when the extent of the dedicated operations required it, moved the LEPC to the Sheriff's Emergency Management Division. The Kent LEPC won early recognition from the state emergency planners for its "exemplary" commitment to public safety and, over its lifetime, half a dozen national awards for the extra effort entailed in creating educational videos, public information packets, and training for local communities' First Responders



Kent LEPC Chair Deb Alderink points that out that "the Kent County LEPC has done a lot more than just basic compliance related activities

such as planning." She remembers that, "In some cases, LEPC members visited each of the cities and townships within Kent County to educate public officials, including the local first response teams, on the chemicals in their community and how to use the LEPC plan." Captain W. Thomas Sands of the MSP's Emergency Management and Homeland Security Division recently wrote, "The diligence of the committee and its staff has been key in keeping the residents of Kent County...informed and prepared".

In honoring the Kent LEPC's 20th Anniversary, the Michigan DEQ observed, "The Kent County LEPC stands out among Michigan LEPCs because of your outreach to industry and the public. The materials you prepared for public education have been shared with and used by other LEPCs. At the State level, your work with industry reporters has been evident. The annual workshops that you hold for businesses and farms in Kent County have noticeably improved compliance with the SARA Title III requirements. "

Noting that, for the first time in 20 years of the LEPC's existence, all fire departments in Kent County now have access to the most current hazardous chemical inventory data in addition to the Offsite Emergency Response Plans, Community Right-to-Know specialist Susan Parker declared that, "Because of the efforts of the Kent County LEPC, the community in Kent County can be assured of a level of protection in the event of a chemical release emergency that is unsurpassed."

LEPC

The Kent County LEPC is housed within the Sheriff's Department's Emergency Management Division under the Lieutenant Jack Stewart. Sue Barthels is the LEPC Coordinator, reachable at 616-632-3256.

Grand Rapids Fire Department Battalion Chief Gary Szojko heads the city's LEPC. 616-456-3900.

On the World Wide Web...

Local: Kent County LEPC
www.accesskent.com/lepc

State: Michigan DEQ
www.michigan.gov/deq

Federal: US EPA
www.epa.gov

