



For IR Emergency Preparedness Guide

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Contact: Gayle Shirley, Communications Manager, 406-457-8908

Public Health: Emergency Responders without Uniforms

By Gayle Shirley

Lewis and Clark Public Health

When you think of emergency responders, public health might not immediately come to mind.

But history has shown that biological attacks on our population can be just as deadly and disruptive – perhaps even more so -- as natural disasters and mass shootings.

Emergency preparedness and response became an urgent national priority in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. We all gained new respect and appreciation for the risks that law enforcement, firefighters, and EMTs take to protect our safety.

Only a week later, a series of attacks involving anthrax germs sent through the mail killed 5 people and infected about 20 others. While this event, thankfully, had a limited impact, officials realized that contagious diseases could be used to carry out bioterrorism attacks on an unthinkable scale.

This initial focus on bioterrorism soon shifted to an “all-hazards” approach. Emergency responders recognized that nearly every disaster poses some threat to public health. For example, almost every year wildfire smoke blankets the Helena Valley, impacting our heart and lungs.

Since 2001, there have been many occasions worldwide when public health was called upon for emergency response: Zika in Latin America, Ebola in Africa, lead-contaminated drinking water in Michigan, and radiation leaks from a Japanese nuclear plant are just a few that come to mind.

In today’s highly mobile and interconnected world, a disease outbreak or epidemic in any part of the world is only hours away from being an imminent threat somewhere else.

Lewis and Clark Public Health takes its role as emergency responders very seriously. Our staff have been involved in responding to local wildfires and floods. We train and exercise regularly, often with other local and state partners, to be ready to respond to all kinds of events.

We want to be as ready as possible for the public health challenges that loom on the horizon. These include:

- new infectious diseases;
- outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, like measles and diphtheria;
- the growing resistance of some diseases to the antimicrobial drugs used to treat them;
- the accidental release of radiation or toxic chemicals;
- increasing air and water pollution;
- increasingly violent storms and flooding that contaminate food and drinking water;
- sanitation for emergency shelters (used in wildfire or earthquakes, for example); and
- a multitude of potential health threats related to climate change, such as extreme heat, drought, famine, and the migration of disease-carrying animals into new habitats.

We also serve as a resource to our community, educating them about how they can personally prepare. Because ultimately it's the responsibility of each of us to be as ready as possible to cope during a disaster.

We encourage you to visit our website at www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org. For preparedness tips, including how you can create a family preparedness plan and go-kit, visit www.ready.gov.