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PEMA, DEP OFFICIALS TRAIN VOLUNTEER RADIATION EXPERTS TO HELP WITH EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Volunteers Would Provide On-Scene Expertise Until State Officials Arrive

HARRISBURG: Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency and Department of Environmental Protection officials are training 36 private-sector health physicists from around the state to be part of the Pennsylvania Radiological Assistance Program Team to provide timely on-scene advice to first-responders in case of an incident involving radioactive materials.

“When Pennsylvania’s police, fire and emergency service response crews arrive at an incident scene involving radioactive materials, they need expert advice as soon as possible on how to protect the public and themselves from possible radiological exposure,” said PEMA Director David M. Sanko. “Training people with expertise in radiological issues in how to work in the high-pressure environment of an emergency site will help better ensure our local, county and state first-responders take the right action to protect the public when minutes count.”

“DEP suggested this team of private-sector health physicists be developed as part of the Governor’s 9/11 Security Task Force recommendations,” said David J. Allard, director of DEP’s Bureau of Radiation Protection. “Because of the size of our state, it could take some time for DEP’s regional Bureau of Radiation Protection staff to reach an emergency scene. Local PaRAP Team members could respond much more quickly, and provide critical advice to first-responders, and information to top state officials, much more quickly.”

The goal eventually is to have at least one PaRAP Team member in each of the state's 67 counties. All PaRAP Team members will be highly qualified people from the private sector. Once a team member has completed training and has been added to the home county emergency responder list, he or she will receive proper identification to permit access to emergency sites. Some team members may receive radiological survey instrumentation kits recently purchased by DEP with U.S. Department of Homeland Security funding.

"It's vital these radiological experts understand how to function at an emergency scene," PEMA Director Sanko added. "The training they receive will concentrate on the incident command system and emergency organizational structure, as well as the operating procedures, safety practices, terminology and communications protocols, and safe working practices in a disaster environment."

"Our mandate as an agency is to protect the public health and the environment," Allard said. "We believe by training these radiation protection experts to help in the first hours of an emergency situation, we will be enhancing our ability to do just that."