

16-03

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Local Radiation Preparedness

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) supports effective radiation emergency preparedness and response efforts at local health departments based on the recommendations of the NACCHO Radiation Workgroup and our partners in protecting the nation from radiation incidents. NACCHO is committed to enhancing readiness for radiation emergencies in order to mitigate potentially disastrous public health outcomes.

In order to best prepare local health departments for a radiation emergency, including nuclear power plant incidents, radiological dispersal devices (RDDs), radiological exposure devices (REDs), improvised nuclear devices (INDs), and nuclear detonations, NACCHO urges the following actions:

- Federal and state agencies should increase financial support to local health departments and other relevant local stakeholders to engage in radiation preparedness planning activities.
- Federal, state, and local agencies should advance ongoing initiatives that provide guidance and resources to help establish viable radiation emergency response plans at all local health departments. These plans should be inclusive of the needs of the whole community and developed in coordination with relevant local, regional, state, and federal partners.
- Federal, state, and local agencies should promote radiation preparedness training for local health department staff to maintain institutional knowledge where few resources exist.
- State and local health departments should conduct regular radiation drills and exercises to demonstrate the ability to execute radiation preparedness plans and continuously improve and vet existing radiation preparedness plans.
- Hospitals and local health departments should support and engage local medical reserve corps volunteers to prepare for radiation emergencies and to test deployment, communication, and coordinating capabilities.
- Local health departments should be involved in federal and state radiation preparedness guidance and resource development related to public health, at all stages of development; these stages include needs assessment, priority setting, development, review, testing, implementation, promotion, and revision.
- Federal agencies should expand promotional activities to ensure that state and local health departments are aware of new and updated radiation guidance and resources.
- Local health departments should develop policies and programs to include radiation emergency training for all local health department staff and volunteers who will have a role in a radiation response.
- Local health departments should include a radiation annex to their all-hazards preparedness plans, as is done with the National Response Framework (NRF).



- Federal, state, and local agencies should coordinate radiation emergency preparedness planning efforts and exercises with local health departments to improve coordination during a radiation emergency.
- Federal, state, and local agencies should continue to vet public messaging using radiation subject matter experts in advance of and during radiation emergencies.

Justification

According to the 2015 National Security Strategy, “No threat poses as grave a danger to our security and well-being as the potential use of nuclear weapons and materials by irresponsible states or terrorists.”¹ Weapons such as INDs and RDDs have the potential to inflict physical and widespread psychological damage. RDDs are easily created and concealed, making them radiological weapons with the highest probability of use in an attack. Frequency of nuclear material theft is high, with a 2015 report from the International Atomic Energy Agency’s Incident and Trafficking Database noting over 40 instances of nuclear material theft in 2013 and 2014 alone.²

Radiation emergencies can negatively impact the health of many individuals and severely threaten national security. Often local organizations do not fully grasp their responsibilities even though a radiation emergency will require a whole-of-community response. During a radiation emergency, health departments may represent the interface of Emergency Support Function 8 (ESF-8) and have responsibilities to manage population monitoring. It is also essential that radiation preparedness plans incorporate considerations for those with functional and access needs, as those populations may require accommodations that ensure equal access to response information and resources. Beyond infrastructure damage and physical health effects, local organizations must be ready to accommodate the psychological impact of a radiation emergency.

There is insufficient awareness and general knowledge of radiation by both the general public and many potential responders, which can impede and complicate response operations and communications. To effectively mitigate the situation, radiation emergencies require unique resources, training, and communication beyond an all-hazards disaster response. Too often, the commitment to radiation emergency preparedness suffers because these types of incidents have low probability. Regardless of probability, the high consequence of a radiation emergency demands that specific resources (including both staff and funding) must be committed to radiation preparedness activities. Acknowledging the enormous destructive potential of radiation emergencies, it is important that local health departments and other relevant local stakeholders are fully aware of their responsibilities and existing plans.

Local health departments need a comprehensive set of accessible and consistent guidance, tools, trainings, and resources, easy to digest and adapt, in order to build and sustain radiation preparedness response strategies. Though there are a variety of radiation guidance documents and tools available, challenges persist in finding the time/resources to commit to adapting these materials to fit the needs of a local health department. To ensure that local health departments can incorporate the available radiation guidance, the local health department perspective must be included throughout the entire spectrum of radiation guidance development. Vetting with local stakeholder input is needed to ensure developed products are able to be implemented without gaps at the operational level. Including local health departments as part of the process builds

stronger, better-tailored products and helps raise these end users' awareness of such products prior to their need as well.

In preparation for and following a radiation emergency, it is critical for responding organizations at the local level to coordinate with surrounding local jurisdictions, hospitals, non-government response organizations, and state/federal partners. Without structured plans in place establishing a chain of command, staffing, and resources, it is unlikely the affected area would have a cohesive and effective response and recovery.

External communications with the public following a radiation emergency are of utmost importance. Naturally, there is fear and misunderstanding in the public perception of the implications of a radiation emergency. Thus the development of messaging templates vetted by public information subject matter experts in advance of an emergency and direct, clear communications with the public during an emergency are critical.

References

1. Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy 2015*, Retrieved February 3, 2016 from: https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf
2. International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA Incident and Trafficking Database (ITDB) *Incidents of nuclear and other radioactive material out of regulatory control 2015 Fact Sheet*, Retrieved February 3, 2016 from: <http://www-ns.iaea.org/downloads/security/itdb-fact-sheet.pdf>

Record of Action

*Proposed by NACCHO Radiation Workgroup
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