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EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS PLANNING TABLETOP EXERCISE: FACILITATORS' GUIDE

UPR PREPAREDNESS CENTER

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INTRODUCTION

Public health professionals receive education and training in a wide range of disciplines, come from a variety of professions, work in many types of settings, and are engaged in numerous kinds of activities. One thing public health professionals have in common is a focus on population-level health. As we begin the 21st century, public health professionals are faced with major challenges, including the impact of a bioterrorist attack. There is an increasing cause for concern about re-emerging diseases, microbial and viral, and the increase in international trade which could foster the distribution of products associated with major health risks.

No government agency, no healthcare system, no community is immune to disaster, and yet the public health system is called upon to respond, be available, and be prepared for whatever occurs. The purpose of conducting a tabletop exercise is to provide local public health entities with information and guidance on key ingredients to consider when a disaster, crisis, or any type of emergency situation occurs. Tabletop exercises are one of the strategies that the public health workforce can use to convene and engage with their community partners.

What is a tabletop exercise?

- A group discussion stimulation based on a fictitious account of a possible and plausible bioterrorist scenario.
- There is no time pressure; all participants are encouraged to share their ideas and thoughts.
- Pauses for discussion of specific questions will occur during the exercise.
- The Facilitator will focus on the overall response and decision-making process during the exercise.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the exercise is to improve emergency operations in order to detect unannounced bioterrorist attack, determine biological cause of attack, ensure communications and public information, and discuss the control measures required for the specific scenario.

The aims of this exercise are: (1) to become familiar with bioterrorist threats, (2) to test your bioterrorism and emergency readiness capabilities, and (3) to develop and build relationships needed during a bioterrorist event. The goals of the tabletop exercise should be discussed and agreed upon prior to development. They should be shared with the participants at the beginning of the exercise.

After completing this exercise, the participants will:

1. Increase employee awareness about hospital disaster plans
2. Examine capabilities for detecting an unannounced attack
3. Evaluate the hospital's management of a bioterrorist disaster
4. Illustrate state and federal responsiveness
5. Assess coordination of public information policies and practices
6. Establish closer working relationships
7. Identify gaps in capacities, policies, resources, communication, other

TARGET AUDIENCE

This exercise may be used with public health professionals and first responders such as emergency medical services (EMS) personnel, epidemiologists, infection control practitioners, hospitals & clinical laboratories, medical examiners (ME), policemen, firemen, staff from the Departments of Health, Agriculture, Natural Resources, Justice, and Veterans Affairs, emergency room (ER) physicians and personnel, FBI personnel, and personnel from other emergency management agencies.

Make sure the size of the group, especially the number of players, stays manageable. The number of players and participants should not exceed 25 individuals. Since every player will have information to contribute during the tabletop, strive to strike the appropriate balance among the length of the exercise, subject matter, and appropriate number of participants. Participants should be selected taking into consideration the collaborating agencies which would be involved in this type of particular situation.

EXERCISE STRUCTURE

The exercise format will consist of five events (scenarios). Background information will be offered for each scenario. Structured questions after each event will guide the discussion among the facilitator and the audience. The roles of participants will be established prior starting the exercise.

The suggested framework for discussion should be headed toward: What can we do, given existing resources? (2) What should we do, if resources were available?, and (3) What do we need to modify existing disaster response plans?

Facilitator

The facilitator is responsible for leading the tabletop exercise. It is their responsibility to set the ground rules and tone before the exercise begins. Much of the success of your tabletop exercise rests with the facilitator and logistics arrangements for the exercise. The facilitator should be a well prepared, highly enthusiastic, good communicator for this type of teaching strategy. The facilitator should be qualified to conduct tabletop exercises through training and practical experience.

The qualifications of a good facilitator include: good interpersonal and communication skills, prepared in advanced, expertise and knowledge on the subject, experience in the public health system and emergency management

response, and familiar with collaborations and responsibilities among agencies during a crisis or bioterrorist event.

Presentation Format and Handouts

The most effective presentation format is to use a MS Power Point presentation, which can be created using the *BtCreate Customizable Scenario* Software. The facilitator will use the slides to guide the participants. Handouts should be provided to each participant before beginning each event. Only slides concerning each scenario should be included, so that participants cannot look ahead and identify the outcome being addressed. The handouts may be as simple as copies of the Power Point slides. The handouts are products that the players and participants may use as resources in the future. Decide whether all participants should receive handouts or just the players. Extra copies of all the printed materials of the exercise should be available on site.

Handouts with information regarding the disease are optional. These handouts could include the following information: description of the disease and its causes, signs and symptoms of the disease, transmission routes, epidemiology of the disease, treatment of ill and exposed persons, prevention measures, existence of vaccines, and potential of the disease for bioterrorism, among others.

Another optional resource that can be prepared and distributed among participants is a directory of key personnel during an emergency situation, a description of their functions, and their contact information.

EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS

Before the Exercise

The facilitator should encourage players to participate and share ideas freely with the group. Make players aware that this is not an exercise to test their current capabilities and plans. It is to raise awareness, to educate, to begin or continue

the planning process, and to develop collaborative relations in dealing with a real time event.

An overview of the tabletop goals and objectives should be provided. Some discussion needs to take place regarding the proper use of the handouts (e.g., don't look ahead). All participants and observers should be asked to turn off cellular telephones and pagers. The facilitator should review the agenda with the group, and ask if they have any questions or concerns before the exercise begins.

The room should be large enough to accommodate all of the players, observers, event staff, and guests. A "U" table or big discussion/meeting table arrangement allows for maximum interaction among participants. Face to face contact between participants and players is desirable. Check all audiovisual equipment and microphones to be sure they are functioning prior the exercise.

During the Exercise

The estimated time for each scenario should be 30 minutes, including a Q&A period (questions and answers), with a short recess between events. Provide coffee and water during the exercise.

After the Exercise

At the end of the exercise, the facilitator should thank all participants. Providing lunch after a morning event creates an excellent networking opportunity among the participants.