

Health, emergency officials test response

by *Olivia Goldberg*

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AUBURN - Roughly 30 local health and law enforcement officials assembled Friday morning in the basement of the county office building to assert what roles their respective agencies would play in the event of a chemical and radiation emergency.

A two-hour roundtable drill took officials through three distinct scenarios involving assessment, response and salvage in the event a radiological dispersal device (RDD or "dirty bomb") goes off at, say, the city's water treatment plant.

Each scenario gave participants, as a group, between 30 and 60 minutes to ferret out gaps in the ways they might coordinate with one another to respond in a unified manner.

The drill fulfilled state Department of Health requirements, which mandate local health agencies to work through two drills. The last drill, a roundtable discussion May 30, took professionals through an isolation and quarantine plan in the event of contamination.

"It's gotten us better in touch with emergency response and first response procedures," said Kathleen Cuddy, the deputy director of health services.

Citing problems last summer when a sand filter at the water treatment plant failed and prompted a boil-water advisory, Cuddy said her planning team chose the plant as the "ground zero" setting for Friday's fictitious scenario.

"We knew people had ideas of how to work with the water treatment plant, and thought, what if something more complicated were to happen there," Cuddy said.

Members from ICF Consulting, a Virginia-based company that provides advisory and technological services along the lines of homeland security, helped move discussions along so that professionals could find ways to mobilize and coordinate in a manner that would allow state and federal forces to "plug in."

"There have to be commonalties - there has to be a common language," said Michael Echols, a technical specialist from ICF. "The FBI needs to know who to talk to, where to go."

Cuddy said she has been impressed with the coordination response of services in the past, and that drills like the one Friday morning help law enforcement, health officials and volunteers galvanize that much more effectively. Auburn Fire Department Captain Mark Fritz agreed.

"It's very good for us to sit like this," he said. "I know I come away with a better understanding of how to support these guys, and how they can support us."

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