

Understanding the Mission of Local Emergency Planning Committees

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The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 72nd Annual Conference on Nov. 18 from 9:45-10:45 a.m.

Local emergency planning committees (LEPCs) are the backbone of the Emergency Planning and Community Right-To-Know Act (EPCRA). They are typically a collection of volunteers made up of local government employees, first response agencies, facility representatives, and members of the public. While EPCRA does contain a list of desired membership backgrounds and representation, most LEPCs do not have members in all those categories. Rarely will an LEPC have staff and even less often will that staff be either paid or applied to LEPC functions on a full-time basis.

The typical LEPC functions without a budget or with only a small amount of money frequently in the form of grants from the State Emergency Planning Commission (SERC) or local businesses. The chair and LEPC members often provide support from their own pockets or with discretionary funds from their employer's budgets.

LEPCs are frequently organized within the offices of a first response agency or local government office of emergency management. In such cases, it can be difficult to identify where the parent agency's activities end and the LEPCs begin. The functions are complementary and therefore that distinction is frequently misleading or of little importance in the day-to-day planning and preparedness of the community.

A limited reading of EPCRA gives the impression that the LEPCs are supposed to develop emergency response plans for hazardous substances. This can create a conflict if

it is routine for such plans to already exist within first response agencies and local emergency management offices. An LEPC that is housed within one of these agencies will have typically been involved in its planning activities. More independent LEPCs will frequently be active in providing information and input to these agencies to help them improve the plans.

In some communities, the LEPC has become a broader all-hazards emergency planning agency within the community. This happens when the cooperation and resources available within the LEPC make this the most efficient approach for that community. While not all SERCs have adopted policies on the coordination between LEPCs and other planning agencies, most encourage whatever arrangement is most productive for the community.

Most LEPCs consider and adopt projects based on core missions they feel are important in the community. These may involve a variety of matters but are generally focused on a desire to protect first responders and the public through better information and awareness of risks in the community. Consideration must be given to the resources available and the interests of the members. Most SERCs will support a vast range of LEPC activities if they have some relationship to the intent of EPCRA.

The greatest tool available to an LEPC is its very substantial information-gathering power. However, most SERCs encourage LEPCs to do more than just collect boxes of paper. Many LEPCs focus their activities on information requests that bring facil-

ities into closer cooperation with the first responder community. Examples are fire department approval of contingency plans, exercise organization, and public awareness of expected behavior during an emergency. EPA has memorialized this concept of "coordination and cooperation" in recent rulemaking on Risk Management Plans and Worst-Case Scenario planning under the Clean Water Act. These concepts are also addressed in ASTM Standard E3241-20, Standard Guide for Coordination and Cooperation between Facilities, Local Emergency Planning Committees, and Emergency Responders.

LEPCs also perform a generalized role in community-wide efforts to improve public awareness of risks and preparedness for emergencies. They will encourage very basic things such as emergency kits, first aid training, and household safety. Often, they will work on projects such as household hazardous waste collection, school lab chemical safety, and the hazards of methamphetamine labs.

Most SERCs will encourage LEPCs to think expansively as there are a myriad of other activities that may be useful in a community. The late Jim Makris—widely called the "father" of EPCRA—once said that it's best to think of LEPCs as local "environmental" protection committees as he saw them working more broadly to improve conditions in their communities.

One of the most difficult tasks faced by an LEPC is creating a public

[continued on page 22](#)

Local Emergency Planning Committees

continued from page 21

awareness of risks and improving community preparedness. LEPCs should look for opportunities through schools, civic groups, youth programs, faith-based groups, and any other organization active in the community to accomplish this mission.

This means that LEPCs must embrace a broader sense of community responsibility for accident prevention and preparedness. It is not appropriate to be a passive collector of information. The below “Golden Rules” are proposed for the broader community.

Preferably it is the LEPCs that should lead the process of addressing the goals stated in the Golden Rules, but that is not the complete point. Whether or not an LEPC exists, leadership within a community needs to be focused on these issues. Leadership comes from various places depending upon the community, it may be elected leadership, first response agencies, or community groups. Whether or not called an LEPC, the functions must exist, or no community will be adequately involved in accident prevention or preparedness.

State and federal agencies along with facilities should have the expectation that communities will address these issues. This is consistent with the well-recognized civil right to adequate emergency planning. Communities cannot be passive in this regard. The risk is shared, and the responsibility for preparedness is equally shared. Preparedness cannot be imposed on a community, nor can it be provided from outside. All stakeholders have a responsibility to find and encourage appropriate leadership within the community.

The era of passivity in accident prevention and community pre-

paredness is gone. Whether facility, government, first response agency, or member of the public, we are all connected, and we all have a role. The best examples of local emergency planning and preparedness focus on “Golden Rules” that will have the following attributes:

- A close relationship between emergency planners and first response agencies.
 - A close relationship between facilities and these agencies and the public.
 - Information sharing on hazards, accident prevention efforts, and emergency response.
 - Public involvement in developing expectations for public behavior during an emergency.
 - Repeated exercises of emergency response plans including public education.
 - Generalized all-hazards preparedness efforts developed with public involvement.
- We are mindful that in the past the regulatory environment has tended to create an adversary relationship between communities and facilities. From topics as diverse as land use planning and environmental permitting through emergency response, the relationship is often con-

frontational. LEPCs are not regulatory agencies. They have the capacity to break through this barrier for the greater good of their communities.

Golden Rules for LEPCs/Communities

- While the primary responsibilities lie with the industry, there are important responsibilities for stakeholders at the local level.
- Be aware of the risks in your community and know what to do in the event of an accident.
- Communicate and co-operate with other stakeholders on all aspects of accident prevention, preparedness, and response.
- Participate in decision-making relating to hazardous installations
- Know the hazards and risks at installations in your community where there are hazardous substances.
- Prepare for any accidents that occur.
- Co-operate with local authorities, and industry, in emergency planning and response.
- Assist other stakeholders to carry out their respective roles and responsibilities. ◆

