

Energize Your LEPC—Region 7 Newsletter

This newsletter was developed by Region 7 in 2010. While the heading says, “Energize Your LEPC,” these suggestions can also be applied to TEPC organizations as well as LEPC organizations.

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I. INTRODUCTION

EPCRA was enacted by Congress to help local communities prepare for and respond to chemical emergencies. EPCRA requires facilities to report chemical storage and release information and instructs communities to develop emergency response plans. Each state governor must appoint a SERC. The SERCs are to design and appoint emergency planning districts and LEPCs, which have a vital role in coordinating information on chemical storage, emergency planning, and chemical spill response. In addition, the Clean Air Act of 1990 under Section 112(r), or the RMP, was created to prevent chemical accidents at facilities using extremely hazardous substances.

While LEPCs play a critical role, they often have difficulty maintaining member participation. Many communities are more reactive than proactive on emergency matters. For example, immediately after the 9-11 terrorist attack in 2001, LEPC members were very involved because of public interest in emergency planning. However, the momentum slowly declined two years after the major event.

Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Gulf Coast area in 2005, is an example of an event that generated significant interest in emergency planning. Better planning and preparedness may have improved the response, which could have minimized loss of life. Competent and energized LEPCs are more likely to have a proactive approach and respond effectively to their community emergency needs. It takes conscientious effort to maintain the participation of LEPC members through innovative ideas, practical exercises, constant motivations and incentives.

The bottom line is that effective planning saves human lives and reduces property losses and environmental impacts during emergencies.

A group of planners met at the 2007 Region 7 LEPC and TERC Conference. They felt it was time to build a focus group and address the issue of energizing LEPC member participation. The practical tools collected at that event are included in this document.

II. LEPC ENERGIZING TECHNIQUES

The following recommendations were identified and chosen as essential factors in energizing and maintaining effective participation at the local level:

- Continuing Education
- Focus on Effective Leadership
- Team Building
- Empower to Complete Meaningful Tasks
- Recognize Contributions
- Stay Positive
- Remove Hindrances

Continuing Education

We live in a changing world, and LEPC members need to be proactive in emergency response by being up-to-date with new legal requirements and technological standards.

There are readily available courses and informational resources with no or low fees for the continuous educational growth of LEPCs. New technical resources and guidance to assist local emergency planners have been developed in recent years.

Governments at all levels (local, state, and federal) schedule regular conferences, workshops and seminars to develop professional competence and credibility and share new information with planners and responders.

Roles and Responsibilities

The fundamental step of building effective LEPCs starts with members understanding their roles and responsibilities. Expertise requirements for membership are found in EPCRA and other regulations. Members who understand their personal and legal

responsibilities to the community are more likely to regularly participate in LEPC training activities. The EPA and state agencies can provide compliance and outreach assistance, and they have a wealth of information on various emergency subjects available to the public.

By-laws

Both verbal and written instruction about their committees' bylaws (if any) should be included in the members' education. For visual learners, having a hard copy of the bylaws is a useful tool. Revising bylaws can be productive when performed as a collective exercise.

Safety Training

Continuous training on the subject of safety is also crucial in maintaining volunteers' interest. Regular safety classes can be taught in formal and informal settings.

Examples of formal classes are OSHA HAZWOPER and First Aid & CPR trainings, which have periodical renewal requirements. Informal safety classes can be site visits at plants or facility tours where LEPC members gain practical experiences with different protective equipment. Routine scheduled trainings allow LEPC members to stay motivated by building their confidence and credentials.

LEPC Meetings

An educational component must be an integral part of the LEPC meeting agendas. Examples include a slide presentation or video viewing of a recent emergency response event. Discussing response events generates creative ideas which renew the motivation in the LEPC as a team. Participants visualize their roles in these

events and simulate new assignments at the local level. State emergency agencies routinely schedule exercises for LEPC members. At the local level, tabletop drills are also practical ways to evaluate success and challenge their committees.

Professional Development

LEPC members can increase their knowledge by joining interest groups such as the National Association of SARA Title III Program Officials (NASTTPO), trade associations and state emergency planning organizations, which provide opportunities for LEPCs to work together to prepare for emergencies involving hazardous materials.

Focus on Effective Leadership

Effective leadership and good management at the local level play a significant role in sustaining interest. Leaders in LEPCs should be elected officials or be from local government or industry. Emergency managers are often most familiar with local resources, including people, equipment and funding. These leaders should inspire positive teamwork in the committees. An LEPC leader can be any member of the LEPC—the chairperson, emergency manager, or simply any volunteer on the committee who has an effective influence on the group or team. LEPC leaders foster an environment where members become high performers and frequent participants.

These leaders clarify their purpose and goals, build commitment and self-confidence, broaden collective skills, remove externally imposed obstacles and create opportunities for others. Leaders believe in their purpose and people and often exercise the following six principles:

- Keep purpose, goals, and approach relevant and meaningful.
- Build commitment and confidence.
- Diversify the mix and level of skills.
- Manage relationships with outsiders, including removing obstacles.
- Create opportunities for others.
- Do real work.

Team Building

Instilling trust in a group of people can be a rewarding goal. There are many ways to achieve this goal. For example, social activities are fun and effective for engaging LEPCs and their families. These occasions build cooperation and provide networking opportunities. Picnics and outreach at community events are excellent ways to create unified involvement. Fundraising activities can be good incentives to perk group interest. Hazmat emergency exercises serve a dual purpose of being educational and providing a group bonding experience.

Other ideas to build a successful team are:

- Clearly defined purpose, goals and roles
- Clear and effective communication
- Supportive member behaviors (balance of creativity and conformity)
- Well-defined decision procedures
- Balanced participation
- Established ground rules and norms
- Understanding of effective group process
- Effective problem-solving methods

Besides the building of the group, the maintenance and management should be based on solid pillars of high-performance teams:

- Establishing urgency and direction
- Selecting members based on skills and skill potential, not personalities
- Paying particular attention to meeting agenda and action items
- Setting some clear rules of behaviors
- Setting and seizing upon immediate performance-oriented tasks and goals
- Challenging the group regularly with fresh facts and information
- Spending lots of time together
- Exploiting the power of positive feedback, recognition, and rewards

Following these suggestions will increase membership and motivation. Getting and keeping members involved is crucial to your LEPC's success.

Empower to Complete Meaningful Tasks

A Chinese proverb says: “**Tell me** and I'll forget; **show me** and I may remember; **involve me** and I'll understand.”

Empowering volunteers to complete meaningful tasks, solicit new ideas and create new initiatives are ways to keep people interested. One example of a collaborative meaningful task is the Schools Chemical Cleanout Campaign (SC3), a national program aimed at reducing risks of chemical exposures in schools. LEPCs can provide technical assistance to their communities about proper chemical management in K-12 schools.

Another way LEPCs can participate in their communities is by giving outreach and

educational materials about topics such as Shelter-In-Place to their local schools and nursing facilities. These activities can be performed in collaboration with community groups with comparable interest in emergency preparedness, such as:

- **Citizen Corps Councils** work to ensure the security and safety of people.
- **Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs)** train citizens to be first responders in basic disaster medical operations, and light search-and-rescue operations.
- **Fire Corps** advocate enhancement of fire resources.
- **Medical Reserve Corps (MRC)** assess the capacity of the practicing and retired medical population, including physicians, nurses and supporting health professionals.
- **Neighborhood Watch Programs** monitor community criminal activities and are now joining forces with the CERTs.
- **Volunteers in Police Services (VIPS)** are emerging groups supporting local police forces with law enforcement activities.

Recognize Contributions

Publicly recognizing specific individual contributions is also important. The morale of a team and its members will grow when they feel valued and when their efforts are noticed. A sense of belonging is important in any organization or team. For example, when members miss a meeting, someone may volunteer to call or e-mail the absent members to let them know they were missed. Keeping members involved is a must in maintaining interest.

Recognition causes people to strive for greater achievements. Recognized members can become more productive or competitive. A common way to recognize people is to give or nominate them for an award. There are many different types of awards given by communities, private entities, and state and federal governments. For example, award nominations can be sent to EPA for the annual Chemical Emergency Preparedness and Prevention (CEPP) and biennial regional LEPC conferences. Also, please remember the importance of recognizing volunteers who have demonstrated good performances.

Another outcome for giving awards is the visibility it gives to local facilities, businesses and their leaders. Industries are most likely to allow time and give support to their employees when these employees are publicly known to support the common cause of community safety and wellness.

Stay Positive

“Attitude is everything!” Keeping a positive attitude is a must when working with LEPCs. In many organizations, most of the significant work is done by a small fraction of group. Research has demonstrated that in any organization, 20 percent of members do 80 percent of the work.

Know and keep track of core members. Look for exemplary examples to share with the group and send positive and uplifting messages frequently.

Remove Hindrances

LEPC leaders should pay attention to indicators that change the course in membership participation. The indicators below are warning signs for emergency leaders to address these issues. If not addressed in a timely and effective manner,

these symptoms can impair members’ interest and performances. Indicators are noticeable at both individual and collective levels.

At a personal level, the following indicators to watch for among LEPC committee members are:

- Loss of energy or enthusiasm (“What a waste of time.”)
- Sense of helplessness (“There’s nothing anyone can do.”)
- Lack of purpose or identity (“We have no clue as to what this is all about.”)
- Disengagement, or unconstructive and one-sided discussions without candor (“Nobody wants to talk about what’s really going on.”)
- Meetings in which the agenda is more important than the outcome (“It’s all show-and-tell for the boss.”)
- Cynicism and mistrust (“I knew this teamwork stuff was worthless.”)
- Interpersonal attacks made behind others’ backs, to outsiders (“Dave has never pulled his own weight and never will.”)
- Finger-pointing at top management and the rest of the organization (“If this effort is so important, why don’t they give us more resources?”)
- At a group level, an issue of concern is diversity in the composition of the LEPC. The regulations recommend that “the LEPC membership must include, at a minimum, local officials including police, fire, civil defense, public health, transportation, and environmental professionals, as well as representatives of facilities subject to the emergency

planning requirements, community groups, and the media.”

- Another critical factor in the composition of the LEPC is the socio-cultural representation of the community in which the committee is located.
- There are additional concerns that can impact the mission of LEPC. Transparency is the best tool when faced with these threats. Knowing and managing threats can be accomplished by having an open discussion about:
- Lack of resources (funds, time, technology and competent people)
- Political climate (internal and external)—whether community social priorities are aligned with the LEPC’s goals
- Leadership—finding committed community leaders to champion the committees’ activities
- Bias—misinformation, inaccurate data, and false notions about a community can create public resentment, lawsuits, or an unexpected and undesirable outcome that can undermine the committee

III. CONCLUSION

The ideas and tools presented in this document are intended to help develop and maintain members’ participation in LEPCs. Local emergency leaders, not just emergency managers, are key personnel who can prepare their communities for emergency events.

Preparing a community for emergencies requires community involvement of well-trained and enthusiastic volunteer residents. Managing and leading volunteer participation is seldom addressed in LEPC committee functions. Like any critical resource, the human resource element is sustained with strategic planning and positive action. Maintaining an effective LEPC requires constant a supply of energy through activities, innovative ideas and education. LEPC members are much better prepared to respond to emergencies when they are well connected in their community and can rely on each other’s competence.

Keeping LEPCs active and energized is essential for saving lives and minimizing damage to property and the environment.