For Immediate Release

First responders, health officials troubleshoot terrorism scenario at exercise

MORGANTOWN, WV (Sept. 24, 2018) — What if a bomb exploded on a boat near Hazel Ruby McQuain Riverfront Park? What if it also happened an hour before a big Morgantown event was scheduled to start? How would first responders deal with the situation? Where would the Army Corps of Engineers and the United States Coast Guard come in? What about traffic and cell phone coverage?

These issues and more were explored during a tabletop exercise that took place on Sept. 12 at Morgantown Readiness Center. Fifty-two people attended, including area first responders, industry members and representatives of the Army Corps of Engineers, the Coast Guard, the West Virginia Intelligence Fusion Center, the Western Pennsylvania All Hazards Fusion Center and Monongalia County Health Department.

“We generally take information from incidents that are happening worldwide and try to replicate something that might happen in your area,” said David L. Fox, a Bridgeville, Pennsylvania-based security specialist from the Coast Guard, from which he is retired.

Both Fox and Mike Fortney, Monongalia County’s assistant director of Emergency Management who also co-chairs the Area Maritime Security Committee, noted that a great deal of effort was taken to make sure that the scenario presented was as realistic as possible.

“The worst thing I can do from an exercise standpoint is give you something so bombastic that would never happen,” Fox said.

Added Fortney, “We don’t believe in Disneylanding things. I’ve been doing this for so many years. I’ve been to these things where they start going over the scenario and in five minutes, it’s so unrealistic.”
Representatives from two area fusion centers—information gathering and analysis hubs created by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks—were present and also had a hand in creating the scenario.

If an incident did occur in Morgantown, a command center would be set up involving the appropriate local or regional officials and the area’s Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) would go into effect. While responders receive uniform Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) training so they can effectively work and communicate together during an incident using common mandates and language, tabletop scenarios allow different groups to convene and share more specific information.

And with Morgantown situated on the Monongahela River—which starts in Fairmont and flows up to Pittsburgh, where it joins with the Allegheny River to create the Ohio River—officials need to consider how they would respond to incidents that occur on water, either accidental or intentional.

The U.S. Coast Guard unit based in Bridgeville oversees the 328 miles of rivers that comprise these three rivers in three states: Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio, Fox said. And as one speaker at the tabletop exercise noted, the Port of Pittsburgh deals with 35 million tons of cargo that travels through eight counties annually.

Participants pitched ideas and brought up elements that would factor into the scenario, including how traffic would affect getting injured to hospitals; whether to cancel the impending planned event, which would send more people into traffic; and how to deal with an already busy cell phone system.

During the tabletop exercise, it was noted that for certain large planned events, cellular companies bring extra cell power to the area via devices known as Cellular on Wheels (COW) to avoid communication outages.

Fox said that was new and useful information for him that he could use down the road if an incident actually occurred.

“If I’m showing up at 1 a.m., I don’t want to show up having just met you for the first time and understanding how you operate,” he said. “One thing we worry about is communications problems, and cell phones are one of them. It’s good to know AT&T and Verizon bring in additional trunks if we needed them to keep going from a communications standpoint.”

From Fortney’s standpoint, networking with regional officials from Ohio and Pennsylvania also provides an opportunity to find common ground as well as differences between the ways different states approach these matters.
“What we run up against is we have a commonwealth and two states, so what we think is a normal practice is not normal in a commonwealth,” Fortney added. “It’s a unique set of circumstances.”

Attending from Monongalia County Health Department were regional Threat Preparedness manager Jamie Moore; Threat Prep coordinator Joseph Klass; regional epidemiologist Dr. Diane K. Gross; executive director and county health officer Dr. Lee B. Smith; and public information officer Mary Wade Triplett.

For more information on MCHD, check out monchd.org and follow us on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD for up-to-date information on health and safety.

—30—