

# COMMENTARY

## The Office of Health Affairs and Our Role in Health Security

Kathryn Brinsfield, MD, MPH; Sally Phillips, RN, PhD

**T**he Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Health Affairs (OHA) strives to support the nation in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from health threats, including those from natural disasters, chemical or biological events, and emerging diseases. We are the intersection of homeland security and public health, better known as health security. Through our experts and teams, we have built relationships between DHS and public health communities nationwide in planning and preparedness efforts to ensure that we can work together during a crisis.

Our chemical defense program works to prepare communities for medical response following a widespread release of a chemical agent. They recently released planning guidance for first responders that can be used in the event of a chemical incident (available in the **online data supplement**).<sup>1</sup> Through collaboration with organizations like hospitals, transit agencies, law enforcement, and first responders, the chemical defense program assists communities in building chemical preparedness tools.

Our BioWatch program monitors the air for biological agents likely to be used in a bioterrorism attack. If a detection occurs, public health and other local and state officials use the information to coordinate emergency response, including prompt medical care, release of medical countermeasures, and other actions needed to protect public health and safety. Partnerships developed through participation in BioWatch have created a nationwide network of relationships that will prove critical in the event of an act of bioterrorism and preparedness and response efforts for other naturally occurring diseases.

We also realize that local emergency medical services (EMS), fire, and police departments arrive quickly to help after a terrorist attack, natural disaster, or other emergencies. The individuals in our Medical First Responder Coordination Branch collaborate on a routine basis with the nation's EMS systems and the first responder organizations to identify the needs of local systems, propose solutions, and provide guidance where needed to support their capacity and capabilities development.

We also engage EMS stakeholders nationwide to improve response coordination at all levels—between jurisdictions and agencies, across state lines, and with the federal government. Our recent guidance on improvised explosive device (IED) and active shooter incidents looks at evidence-based response strategies and lessons learned from the military and civilian worlds when responding to and managing casualties from IED or active shooter incidents (available in the **online data supplement**).<sup>2</sup>

We interact closely with fusion centers through our State and Local Initiatives team, who support planning by bringing the public health and health care communities into the law enforcement and homeland security conversation. These partnerships build a more complete picture of threats for better preparedness, planning, and response. With fusion centers, we can provide the support in building and strengthening partnerships with public health and health care partners. Data gathered in 2014 indicated that the number of fusion centers with public health and health care partner involvement in their governance body increased and also indicated that many fusion centers identify public health and health care as a main focus area. Public health officials and health care professionals are in a unique position to observe situations within the course of their daily job responsibilities that may provide valuable insight. Such insight can help to keep communities safe from attacks by connecting the dots for law enforcement agencies investigating cases with a potential terrorism connection.

Recently, the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative (available in the **online data supplement**),<sup>3</sup> in coordination with OHA, released training for public health partners. This awareness training is designed to assist public health and health care professionals in understanding their critical role as homeland security partners, recognizing what kinds of suspicious behaviors are associated with pre-incident terrorism activities and understanding how and where to report suspicious activity.

While our teams cover diverse subject matter and we have a variety of experts, we depend on hearing from state and local communities on their needs. It is through

understanding the ongoing issues in communities that we can better support and strengthen our partnerships. We encourage you to share your thoughts and concerns with us, and we will do what we can to support you.

### About the Authors

Assistant Secretary for Health Affairs, Office of Health Affairs, Department of Homeland Security, Washington, DC; and Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health Affairs, Office of Health Affairs, Department of Homeland Security, Washington, DC (e-mail: [Healthaffairs@hq.dhs.gov](mailto:Healthaffairs@hq.dhs.gov)).

### Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2015.129>

### REFERENCES

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2. Office of Health Affairs, US Department of Homeland Security. *First Responder Guide for Improving Survivability in Improvised Explosive Device and/or Active Shooter Incidents*. Published June 2015. Accessed October 11, 2015.
3. SAR Training for Public Health and Healthcare Partners. Nationwide SAR Initiative (NSI) website. <https://nsi.ncirc.gov/hspregistration/health/?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>. Accessed October 11, 2015.