

Terrorism, Public Health Preparedness and Response Planning Forums in the United States-Mexico Border Region

In terms of terrorism and disaster preparedness, the United States-Mexico border is one of the most vulnerable regions. The early detection, identification, management and prompt reporting of infectious disease outbreaks, that are associated with potential bioterrorism agents or other major threats to public health, are fundamental to creating public health preparedness capabilities along the six Mexico and four United States border states.

The border communities are interdependent, thus terrorism preparedness and response between the United States and Mexico border states has to be coordinated, efficient and seamless. Individually, the United States and Mexico have pursued national efforts for terrorism preparedness. However, there is no coordination between these programs. Creating that connection is one of the main goals of the United States-Mexico Border Health Commission (Commission) in sponsoring bilateral forums in this area.

In early 2003, the State Health Officers of Arizona, California and New Mexico, along with a representative from the Office of the Texas Commissioner of Health, met in Albuquerque, NM, to discuss "Terrorism and Emergency Response" along the United States-Mexico border. The meeting included representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Office of Terrorism Preparedness.

Based on the recommendations from the aforementioned State Health Officers, the Commissioners, at the USMBHC's 6th Binational meeting, approved by consensus an implementation plan. The implementation plan supports state-to-state, border wide and bilateral planning efforts. The Commission allocated \$150,000 to sponsor a series of bilateral regional meetings in the border area. It is the Commission's goal to develop a border wide, unified bilateral terrorism and public health emergency preparedness approach which will result in a comprehensive plan for the United States-Mexico border region.

Planning began in early 2003, when the Commission met with heads of the various centers and offices of the CDC. A subsequent meeting, involving the four United States border states directors of health, laid the groundwork for collaboration on a state-to-state level and on a bilateral level with Mexico. This planning is being conducted in coordination with each state's terrorism planning efforts, which are presently funded by the CDC and HRSA.

Using the Binational Border Health Information System's vertical and horizontal approach to strategic planning, the Commission seeks the following outcomes:

- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the ten border states;
- Develop a comprehensive, bilateral terrorism and emergency preparedness plan; and
- Develop a uniform approach to address the regional health strategies for the border region.

Seven CDC/HRSA focus areas have served as a guide to all meetings. They are:

- Planning and readiness assessment;
- Surveillance and epidemiological assessment;
- Laboratory capabilities;
- Hazards (chemical and biological);
- Health Alert Network;
- Risk communication and health information dissemination; and
- Education and training.

Arizona-Sonora

The state of Arizona has been extremely active in conducting forums. It has conducted meetings in Ambos Nogales, Northern Sonora/Cochise County, Yuma/San Luis Rio Colorado, and with the Tohono O'odham Indian Nation. These planning meetings have accomplished the following in each of the sister communities:

- Formed and expanded a binational group of local stakeholders;
- Identified barriers, opportunities, solutions (modified version of the SWOT Model [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats]) and local needs, and prepared a list of recommendations and next steps;
- Identified potentially useful, local models for binational collaboration in emergency response, namely the Binational Contingency Plans;
- Organized into subcommittees and defined roles and responsibilities within their groups;
- Discussed expansion of training opportunities and surveillance systems;
- Participated in local, binational tabletop exercises in coordination with Emergency Management Offices and Health Departments;
- Produced a first draft of their Binational Terrorism and Emergency Preparedness Plans; and
- Produced a Binational Emergency Operations Directory.

Paso del Norte Region: New Mexico-Texas-Chihuahua

In late April 2003, 85 representatives from the states and border cities of New Mexico, Texas and Chihuahua attended the "Terrorism and Public Health Preparedness and Response Planning Forum." The participants provided information on the status of terrorism and emergency preparedness efforts from a public health perspective in their areas. These planning meetings have accomplished the following:

- Formed a binational core group of state-regional-local stakeholders from the three states;
- Identified needs, barriers and prepared a list of potential solutions and next steps;
- Organized into subcommittees and defined roles and responsibilities within each group;
- Discussed expansion of training opportunities and surveillance systems; and
- Produced a Binational Emergency Operations Directory.

Texas-Mexico border region

The Texas Department of Health, in partnership with Mexico Ministry of Health, held their first comprehensive Binational Terrorism and Public Health Preparedness and Response Forum in Brownville/Matamoros in October 2003. Additional forum sites along the Texas-Mexico border are planned to follow in quick succession. Additionally, three Terrorism and Emergency Planning Coordinators have been hired by the Texas Department of Health. These coordinators are located in El Paso (Dr. Luis Ortega), Laredo (Calixto Seca) and Harlingen (Silvia Barajas).

California

The California Office of Binational Border Health is currently in the planning stages for their meetings.

Conclusion

The Commission is committed to the development and implementation of a comprehensive Binational Terrorism and Public Health Preparedness and Response Plan. The Commission has allocated the funds to sponsor meetings in California and East Texas. Moreover, there are plans to meet with Mexican federal officials to collaborate on the bilateral aspects of this plan. All vertical and horizontal planning forums are scheduled to be completed during the Spring of 2004.

In a July 2003 meeting with the Office of Public Health Preparedness, the Commission was asked to become an active player in the Critical Infrastructure Protection, Public Health Group, and to develop a horizontal plan for public health preparedness for the U.S.-Mexico border region.

At the XX Border Governors Conference held in June 2003, it was recommended that the Commission provide continued support to implement the Binational Border Health Information System among the 10 border states.

Finally, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has initiated a new program to enhance the infectious disease surveillance capabilities along the U.S.-Mexico border. The program seeks to improve the early warning infectious disease capabilities in the six Mexico border states. The USMBHC, in conjunction with HHS and the Mexico Secretariat of Health, will oversee the allocation of grant funds based on the each grantee's implementation proposal.