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How to Increase Public Awareness and Improve Emergency Notification: Beach Cities CAER (Community Awareness and Emergency Response)

The Chemical Safety Network is designed to share successful practices in implementation, risk communication, and data use. The projects detailed in the Chemical Safety Network are easily reproducible, low cost and promote partnership-building in the community. This factsheet does not provide extensive information about a project. Rather, it is intended to help stakeholders generate ideas, identify tools and pinpoint funding sources for accident preparedness and prevention initiatives.

Purpose

Beach Cities CAER is a nonprofit group comprised of local businesses, industries, emergency response organizations (first responders and police), utilities, educators, medical facilities, and the public. Located in Southern California, the group is open to members located in the cities of El Segundo, Hawthorne, Manhattan Beach, Torrance, Gardena, Hermosa Beach and Redondo Beach. There are eight chemical and petrochemical companies, three utility companies, nine emergency assistance organizations, five school districts and one major hospital involved in the organization. Over the past decade, the City of Torrance has worked with chemical and petrochemical companies to develop and install warning sirens and other tools to be used throughout the community in case of a chemical emergency. However, a greater public understanding of the warning system and appropriate response actions was needed. The Community Warning System public awareness campaign was developed to teach Torrance residents how to identify a chemical release and how to respond should a chemical emergency occur.

Partnerships

Two chemical companies and one petrochemical company, along with Beach Cities CAER, the City of Torrance and the Torrance Unified School District sponsored the Torrance Community Warning System public awareness campaign. The warning system targets the entire city, which is the location of a number of smaller chemical companies that were not directly involved in sponsoring the outreach campaign.

Budget

The budget was approximately \$75,000, which was funded by the industrial companies involved with the campaign.

Tips For Setting Up Your Campaign



Beach Cities CAER suggests the following tips:

- Identify all tools, systems and procedures and pull together into one unified warning system;
- Conduct community discussion groups and distribute a survey to registered voters to determine their information needs and information access preferences;
- Develop outreach materials including: color guide (student version and adult version); stickers for home and car; teacher kits; press release and advertising campaign;
- Brief news reporters and kick off the campaign at a press conference at a local elementary school following a shelter-in-place drill;
- Send student-version warning system guides home to parents. Reward students with a “free French fries” coupon if they return a signed tear-off sheet in the guide indicating that they had reviewed the material with their parents (approximately 3,500 students returned sheets);
- Run large advertisements in local newspaper for six consecutive weeks to alert readers to check their mail for the guide;
- Mail adult-version guides to all residential and business addresses in your locality;
- Meet with the School District; City Council; homeowner associations; representatives of private schools, day-care facilities, senior-citizen centers, and senior citizen care and medical facilities;
- Establish a phone bank to handle calls during emergencies and to determine what additional training may be needed;
- Produce and air a program on city cable channel (repeat the program periodically); and
- Design and implement an annual refresher course.

Challenges

The group identified the following challenges:

- Large transient population (night time residential population is approximately 130,000, daytime population approximately 500,000);
- Diverse ethnic population , over 60 dialects are spoken, lending to language barriers in communication tools and the need for multiple communication techniques (mailings, newspaper articles, cable television, community meetings);
- Condensation of pertinent information into readable and friendly language and in an accessible format; and
- Need to identify additional audiences and to develop refresher communication to initial audiences.

Increased Awareness

In June 2000, the Community Warning Siren was used for the first time to warn the community of a chemical release. Schools within the 1.2-mile radius of the warning siren sheltered in place and waited for the all-clear signal. Many neighboring businesses sheltered in place. While some of the calls that came into the phone bank during the emergency indicated the need for additional training; many residents indicated they had followed the appropriate procedure and had sheltered in place. Callers then requested specific information regarding the incident as well as next steps.

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