

CERC IN ACTION: A Sticky Situation

Wayne County Health Department, Indiana

Account from Wayne County Health Department's Environmental Health Specialist



Crisis Situation

On March 4, 2014, the Wayne County Health Department (WCHD) in Richmond, Indiana, received a call about candy that was potentially contaminated with a chemical substance. After the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH) was notified about the situation, communication quickly spread to other state and federal agencies. The Indiana Governor's Office, the Indiana State Police, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) were all contacted about the incident. Within the day, the Indiana State Police's detective unit and a special HAZMAT team were dispatched from the ISDH to test the candy in question at WCHD. The results of the initial tests confirmed that the candy was indeed contaminated with a chemical commonly found in pesticides.

Communication Response

The following day, an Indianapolis news station requested to interview a subject matter expert (SME) from the WCHD about our response to the incident. To prepare for the interview, I coached the SME using the education obtained from a Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) "Train the Trainer" course I took in 2012. I had also previously trained the SME on CERC principles during a class I instructed in 2013. I offer these CERC classes to local, regional, and state emergency preparedness organizations, so they are prepared to effectively communicate throughout all phases of a disaster.

During this particular incident, it was vital that we be the first to communicate to the public. We wanted to make sure the local community was aware of the potential health risk. We also sought to build community confidence in the credibility of our

organization to meet local needs during a health crisis. It was important for the WCHD to distribute honest and accurate information in a timely manner to the public, especially in a crisis scenario. We also wanted to ensure that local communities were informed and could make personal health decisions so that they had ownership of their own personal health and safety.

"What CERC Taught Me ..."

After comprehensive testing by the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH), the candy was found to be safe for consumption. This particular incident highlighted the importance of CERC and how the core principles were used to ensure that this crisis situation was handled in a professional matter in the interest of public health preparedness.

"The principles of CERC pertain not only to public health entities, but to all preparedness agencies on all levels."

CERC principles, in addition to the education that I received at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), equipped me with the necessary tools to effectively mitigate and navigate the emergency communication needs during this crisis that not only helped ensure the safety of Wayne County citizens, but also contained a public information crisis that could have easily spread out of control with the amount of agencies involved.

The impact of the training that I received has not only changed the way that I handle the development of our Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication plan, but developed the way I view communication professionally as well as personally.

I truly believe that every employee within an organization is a spokesperson for that agency, whether or not that employee is in an official capacity to speak to the public. This is the method in which I train preparedness organizations, and it was proven to be successful in this particular circumstance.

It's easy to train for the scenario, but the application of CERC principles is where the real education begins. Learning by doing is the best training a spokesperson or public information officer has, and this situation put me right in the driver's seat.

