

## **RTNDA Lessons Learned**

### Radio and Television News Directors Foundation News and Terrorism Workshops

The Radio and Television News Directors Foundation, in association with the National Academies and the Department of Homeland Security, is conducting 10 News and Terrorism Workshops across the country. The goal is to examine communication in a time of crisis—what works and what needs work—as well as to provide background on potential terrorist threats and guidance on how journalists and public information officers can better prepare for what might happen next.

The workshop series, “News and Terrorism: Communicating in a Crisis,” features a scenario exercise, tailored for each session, in which a small group of journalists, government officials and experts react to a simulated terrorist incident—chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear. The day-long program also includes useful scientific information, self-protection advice and disaster planning.

Each workshop involves about 100 participants, including journalists and news managers in radio, television, cable and print; public information officers; science and public health experts; emergency managers and other officials. Participants gain knowledge, resources and contacts that will prove invaluable should their communities be attacked.

Five workshops have been held in Chicago, Portland, OR, Philadelphia, Kansas City and Miami. Five more are planned in Austin, Atlanta, Denver, Boston and San Francisco. The workshops have revealed gaps in information and communication within communities and have helped to pinpoint possible solutions.

Here are our findings so far:

- Many broadcast newsrooms do not have an emergency plan for a crisis or know who to turn to, both in government and expertise.
- Television stations, as high-profile community institutions, may be targets. Therefore it’s important to make sure they’re as secure as possible.
- Public turns to the broadcast media, especially during a crisis so it’s critical that TV and radio have the “hardware” (technical capability) and the “software” (information and know-how) to stay “wired” with its community in the event of a crisis.

## WORKSHOPS—SCENARIOS TO DATE:

**Chicago**—A dirty bomb is disseminated on a weekday around lunchtime from a conventional-looking white truck. It explodes in the Board of Trade building, which is located in the heart of the city’s financial district, adjacent to one of the most-used El stops. Thirty minutes after the incident is over. Reports are leaking out that this explosion may have been radioactive.

**Kansas City**—A worker in a flour processing plant suddenly collapses. She is experiencing shortness of breath and blisters. Five minutes later, two other workers also collapse. A half-hour later the first worker is dead. The agent is found to be T-2, introduced into the flour via an external pipe.

**Portland, OR and Philadelphia**—At lunchtime on a warm fall day, people sitting in a main city park (Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland and Love Park in Philadelphia) smell the strong aroma of roasted almonds, which becomes apparent a few moments after two white trucks had pulled up and quickly left. A few minutes’ later people begin collapsing and others soon experience difficulty breathing. Less than two hours later the cause is identified as Hydrogen Cyanide gas.

**Miami**—A smoky cloud suddenly collects in a hall at the Miami Beach Convention Center at midday; several conventions were going on at once including a rehearsal for a national cheerleading convention. Moments later a few people began having breathing problems. Three hours later, authorities found that empty bottles inside the janitorial closets tested positively for the orthopox virus. Two days later, smallpox has been confirmed.

## WORKSHOP FINDINGS

1. ***Knowledge gap on the part of some members of the media*** – An on-air reporter from a major station in Chicago, for example, stood up and said that she didn’t know what the term “sheltering in place” means.
2. ***Who’s in charge?*** In some jurisdictions (for example, the metropolitan Philadelphia area, which is a tri-state region) it is hard for reporters to know who is overseeing the emergency. Traditionally federal and state emergency teams defer to local authorities – but not always and sometimes a situation can change without warning.
3. ***Local authorities don’t always bring in the media immediately during a crisis or when planning emergency operations.*** To this end, one PIO in Miami said the following: “As PIO of a government organization, the program really caused me to think about our bureaucracy. The bottom line I walked away with was – communicate with media much more frequently about what we know and what we don’t.”

4. ***Tensions between media and authorities and providing “rumor control.”*** In many of the scenarios the local authorities emphasized their unwillingness to confirm information to the media unless they had all the facts about a situation. This was problematic because often live coverage was underway. As a result, reporters were tempted to broadcast unconfirmed information – and misinformation.
5. ***Access to scientific experts.*** In each of our scenarios, reporters were confronted with a situation requiring some degree of scientific expertise. Media members came away from the workshops realizing the importance of cultivating a variety of scientific experts (and their contact information) ahead of time.
6. ***Workshops motivated reporters to create their own emergency plans.*** One traffic reporter in Philadelphia wrote to us afterwards: “Since the meeting I have talked with the staff here at the traffic center and we will be holding our own workshop in the very near future. How we do our job in the traffic center could well determine how fast emergency equipment can get to the scene. Traffic management will be key during a crisis.”
7. ***Competition vs. getting the story right.*** Natural journalistic competitive instincts are in play during a crisis, pushing the drive to “be first” with a story and to try to get certain experts as “exclusives” (excluding other media from access to that person.)