

The Kansas City area's Regional Homeland Security Coordinating Committee has roots in both a disastrous mass-fatality structural collapse and its region's long history of cooperation.

# Heartland security



Photos courtesy Mid-America Regional Council

During a two-day exercise held in September 2005 by the RHSCC and the University of Kansas Medical Center, emergency responders took advantage of the scheduled demolition of a middle school in Richmond, Mo., to train for explosive incidents and mass casualties.

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**F**or many metropolitan areas, disaster preparedness efforts that cross jurisdictional boundaries and involve multiple emergency disciplines began in earnest after Sept. 11, 2001. The Kansas City area, however, had a 20-year head start.

It was July 17, 1981. The regular Friday afternoon tea dance at the Hyatt Regency hotel drew a large crowd, including spectators who watched the event from second- and fourth-floor skywalks over the lobby where the dance was taking place. Because of a design flaw, the concrete skywalks collapsed under the weight of the spectators and fell onto the revelers below, leaving 114 dead and more than 200 injured in one of the deadliest structural failures in U.S. history.

*At the International Association of Emergency Managers' annual conference last November, the Mid-America Regional Council's Regional Homeland Security Coordinating Committee won the first annual Interagency Disaster Preparedness Award, established by HOMELAND PROTECTION PROFESSIONAL and co-sponsored by the IAEM. We're pleased to be able to bring the RHSCC's story to our readers.*

Local emergency responders and hospitals were overwhelmed almost immediately, and the call went out for help from other agencies. From medical personnel to heavy-equipment operators, the entire region's resources were called on to respond. And on the lessons learned from this disaster, a strong foundation for regional cooperation was built.

## Crossing boundaries

The greater Kansas City area includes 1.7 million people in eight counties, three on the Kansas side and five in Missouri, and covers about 3,800 square miles, an area roughly the size of Connecticut. The eight counties include 116 city govern-

ments and are served by more than 75 fire and EMS agencies.

Through much of the city, the state line is a tree-lined, two-lane neighborhood street, and residents cross back and forth routinely for jobs, shopping and

recreation. Jurisdictional boundaries are often crossed by emergency responders, too, so mutual aid agreements are essential.

At the time of the Hyatt disaster, a fledgling organization of EMS agencies had been meeting for several years under the auspices of the Mid-America Regional Council, the region's association of local governments and metropolitan planning organization. Over the next decade, MARC also became home to the Metropolitan Medical Response System Committee, a Local Emergency Planning Committee and a Metropolitan Emergency Managers Committee.

### A regional, all-hazards approach

With a committee structure and working relationships already in place, MARC was a natural fit for the homeland security efforts that expanded rapidly after Sept. 11. The MARC board of directors formed the Regional Homeland Security Coordinating Committee in May 2002 and appointed about 30 local leaders, including elected officials, fire chiefs, police chiefs, city and county administrators, and others from the existing committees, to its membership. The RHSCC meets bimonthly to set policies and receive reports from a dozen operational subcommittees.

From the beginning, the RHSCC recognized that any single jurisdiction's ability to successfully respond to a major disaster, natural or manmade, depends on regional capabilities and cooperative arrangements. Working under a set of guiding principles that focus on a regional, all-hazards approach, the committee developed a strategic plan to guide investments and strengthen response capabilities.

"One of the important things we have to remember is that the preparations we make for one type of event will often be applicable to other events," says Mike Selves, director of emergency management and homeland security for Johnson County, Kan. "We plan by function as opposed to hazard. The emergency management functions — taking care of the injured, restoring the infrastructure, cleaning up debris — are the same. It's just more efficient and effective to plan for all hazards."

While the overall strategy addresses the entire emergency management cycle (mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery), the RHSCC decided to give priority, at least initially, to developing the region's CBRNE response capabilities, focusing on four key areas: training personnel, providing material resources, developing plans and policies, and building relationships.

### Many disciplines, one goal

The federal Office of Domestic Preparedness defines 10 emergency response disciplines: law enforcement, EMS, emergency management, fire services, hazmat, public works, government administration, public safety communications, health

care and public health. In the Kansas City area, members of these disciplines are brought together in unique ways to further the RHSCC's one overriding goal: to enhance the region's preparedness and response capabilities.

For example, the RHSCC and its Training and Exercise Subcommittee have hosted several events designed to bring law enforcement and public health together, including a forensic epidemiology workshop and a joint meeting on isolation and quarantine. A large tabletop exercise on epidemiology, surveillance, isolation and quarantine is planned for early 2006.

The RHSCC also hosted a special WMD awareness session designed specifically for elected officials and senior government leaders, as well as a soft-target awareness series targeted to the private sector.



Firefighters practice decon procedures at Lee's Summit (Mo.) West High School. More than 450 personnel from 65 agencies participated in a full-scale WMD exercise held in March 2005 in Lee's Summit.

The Training and Exercise Subcommittee offers regular awareness- and performance-level ODP courses, as well as National Incident Management System and Incident Command System courses, to personnel from all disciplines, both at central locations and on site. Special classes are available by request, and the committee works with those purchasing new equipment to make sure that personnel receive the training to use it properly. In addition to training courses, the committee provides support for full-scale and tabletop exercises in the region.

### Monitoring the money

Under the guidance of the RHSCC, MARC administers a variety of homeland security grants. The Resources Subcommittee reviews needs assessments, gathers requests from local agencies, seeks input from the operational committees and develops budget recommendations for the RHSCC. With this system, the hard decisions about how to allocate limited dollars are made with input from people closer to the front lines.

In 2003, Kansas City, Mo., was awarded a federal Urban Area Security Initiative grant for use by the core city, its con-

tiguous counties and mutual aid partners. The RHSCC was asked to administer the grant.

Rich Noll, assistant city manager in Kansas City, Mo., and co-chair of the RHSCC, remembers how that decision was made: “We knew we would have to be very efficient in using those resources. If spending decisions were left to each individual government, we would see a lot of duplication of effort. To make the best use of resources, we wanted to look at the bigger picture and identify what regional gaps in response capability we could fill.”

“We work hard to make recommendations that are truly regional in nature, and not just part of the normal operations for any one department,” says Fred Siems, city manager of Blue Springs, Mo., and co-chair of the Resources Subcommittee. “That has resulted in disciplines working together that may never have done so in the past. Access to homeland security funds may have been the impetus that brought them together in the beginning, but now these people are truly working together for the good of everyone in the region.”

The Resources Subcommittee includes representatives from fire, law enforcement, public works, emergency management, EMS, public health, hospitals and government administration. All eight counties and the region’s four largest cities are included.

A centralized procurement system allows material and equipment purchases to be made more efficiently and also helps ensure that different jurisdictions receive compatible equipment.

Requests for training funds are routed to the Training and Exercise Subcommittee, which evaluates each request. The RHSCC, recognizing training’s importance to the overall mission, allocated funds for full-time staff support for the

training and exercise program beginning in 2004.

All funding decisions are made within the framework of the RHSCC’s strategy. “The goals outlined in that plan were developed by a concerted effort of all parties involved,” says Siems. “The allocation of resources always ties back to the plan.”

### Information management investments

Much time and effort have gone into enhancing the region’s capability to manage information before, during and after a disaster, between disciplines and across boundaries.

Some of the projects currently under way include:

- RAMBIS, the Regional Area Multi Band Integrated System, a region-wide voice communications network that uses radios and equipment already deployed to allow cross-discipline, cross-jurisdiction communications on established mutual aid channels.
- A Personnel Accountability Security System for pre-identification of personnel at the scene of an incident and reporting accountability.
- The Metropolitan Emergency Information System, a shared, Web-based data warehouse of information about personnel, assets and plans.
- The Critical Incident Site Management System, a digital warehouse of information on critical community facilities such as schools, hospitals and utilities.
- Increasing technological capabilities in local emergency operations centers and linking EOCs through the purchase and installation of WebEOC software.
- A geospatial initiative to make use of GIS technology in disaster preparedness and emergency response.
- An electronic patient-tracking system that uses standardized triage tags, bar-code scanners and wireless communication systems to track victims of a mass-casualty incident.

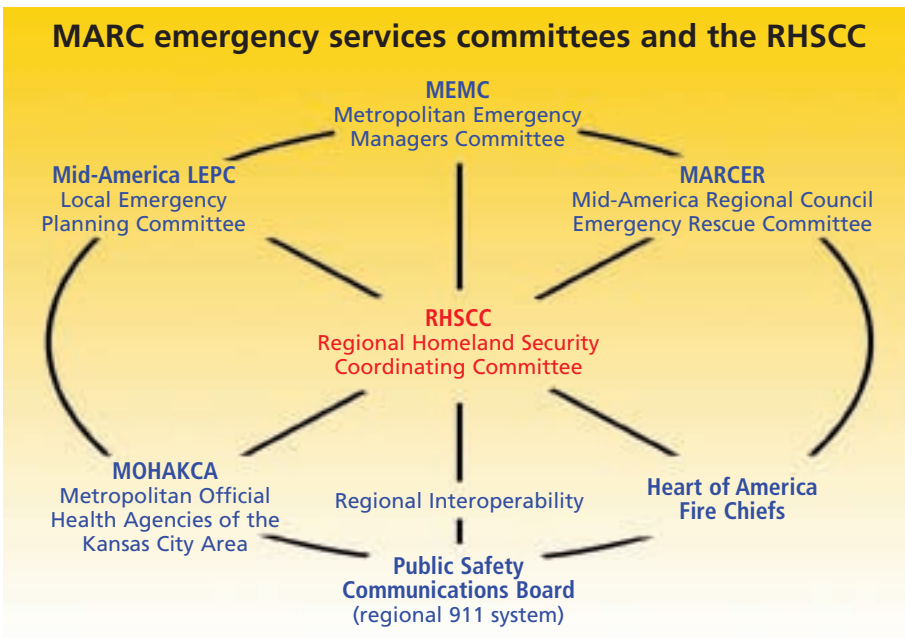
track victims of a mass-casualty incident.

### Support for specialized teams

Many of the fire and law enforcement agencies in the Kansas City area are small departments with limited resources. Of the 116 cities and towns in the region, 82 have populations under 5,000. Interagency cooperation is essential to field specialized response teams that these smaller governments could not otherwise afford.

Eight hazmat teams, some of which are made up of members from neighboring departments, rather than a single jurisdiction, train together regularly. The smaller departments make a commitment to send designated staff to group training, knowing that they can call on the whole team if a hazardous spill occurs within their own boundaries.

Regional homeland security funds provide support for both training and equipment for the hazmat teams,



The six committees in the outer ring all predate the RHSCC, which since its formation has taken the leadership role in each area where homeland security is concerned. The RHSCC includes 12 subcommittees: First Responders, Hospitals, Law Enforcement, Medical Reserve Corps, Mental Health, Plans, Policy, Public Health, Resources, and Training and Exercises, as well as subcommittees for the Personnel Accountability Security System (for incident scene security and credentialing) and the Metropolitan Emergency Information System.

including portable detection and monitoring units that can rapidly identify potentially hazardous gases and vapors. These wireless detection devices allow responders to work from a safe distance.

The region also supports four law enforcement tactical teams: single-agency teams in Kansas City, Mo.; Independence, Mo.; and Overland Park, Kan., and a fourth one made up of members from various agencies in Johnson County, Kan. The four teams existed, and trained together, before the RHSCC started receiving federal funds, but the RHSCC has since provided funds for enhanced training and equipment.

Specialized equipment for these teams, such as tactical blanket panels that can protect team members or civilians from multiple rounds of high-powered rifle fire, is purchased through the centralized procurement system.

By coordinating purchases, the RHSCC can ensure that specialized teams get compatible equipment, so that, for example, when the Overland Park, Kan., hazmat team provides mutual aid at an incident in Kansas City, Mo., the team members will know how to use each other's equipment. In fact, they will already be acquainted with each other from their regular joint training sessions.

City, county and state boundaries are more of an issue for law enforcement than for other response agencies. Currently, police officers on the Missouri side of the region have limited enforcement powers in counties not contiguous to their own, and not all law-enforcement agencies are allowed to cross the state line to work together on major incidents other than natural disasters. MARC and the RHSCC are work-

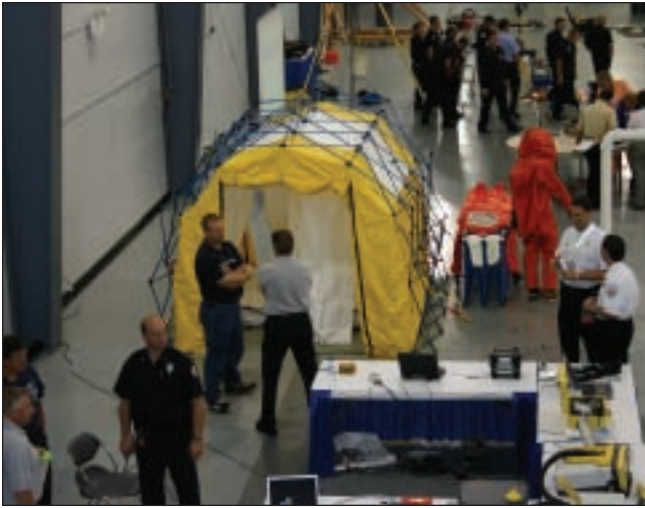


The region's Metropolitan Medical Response System trailer, carrying supplies for use in mass-casualty incidents, leaves the staging area at the Lee's Summit exercise.

ing diligently to encourage the state legislatures to allow cross-state mutual aid for terrorist incidents, investigations and other violations.

### Public health and surge capacity

Through the Mid-America Medical Reserve Corps, the region is building medical surge capacity and giving local volunteers an opportunity to be part of the disaster preparedness efforts. A joint project of MARC and the Greater Kansas City chapter of the American Red Cross, the Medical Reserve Corps is designed to supplement the local public health infrastructure



Elected officials and media representatives browsed exhibits at the "Regional Readiness: How Far Have We Come?" briefing held by the RHSCC in September 2005 at the Metropolitan Community Colleges Business and Technology Center exhibit hall in Kansas City, Mo.

in the event of a large-scale emergency.

Members are divided into three divisions based on their levels of interest and availability. Division 1 members are actively involved in the corps and often take on leadership roles. Division 2 members attend training and occasional meetings, as their schedules permit, and Division 3 members are on call for actual emergencies.

MRC members include not only physicians, nurses, EMTs, pharmacists and mental health professionals, but also mortuary services professionals, security personnel, clerical support/data entry, medical logistics experts, healthcare administrators, translators and others with relevant specialized skills. All members have their licenses and credentials verified in advance, so they'll be ready to report for duty on short notice when needed.

Public health agencies from all eight counties also meet monthly through the Metropolitan Official Health Agencies of the Kansas City Area. This organization was created to promote public health at the regional level and works closely with the RHSCC's Public Health and Hospital subcommittees.

In June 2004, the region hosted the nation's first bi-state Strategic National Stockpile exercise. The exercise included the Missouri and Kansas state health departments, seven local public health agencies from both states, and a local hospital. These groups joined together to see how well they could respond to a simulated bioterrorism event by testing their plans for mass distribution of medications to the public. More than 600 state and local public health employees and 200 hospital staff and volunteers took part.

### Post-Katrina planning

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Kansas City region, like many others, is taking a fresh look at its emergency plans. A thorough update is under way on the area's Metropolitan Medical Response System plan, which outlines the coordination of emergency activities in response to a mass-casualty

incident. Although sections of the plan deal specifically with CBRNE events, the plan is applicable to any incident involving mass casualties. It will be accompanied by a new Regional Coordination Guide, which gives specific guidelines for how jurisdictions will work together during major emergencies.

The RHSCC's Plans Subcommittee is currently crafting the region's response to Preparedness Directive Information Bulletin No. 197, which requires all states and UASI grantees to report on evacuation plans in early 2006.

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— Erin Lynch, MARC

The recent hurricanes also gave a new sense of urgency to planning for the region's special-needs populations and their requirements in the event of an emergency. Using GIS technology, MARC is working to provide first responders throughout the region with detailed maps showing the locations of nursing homes, child-care centers and other facilities that may require special attention in a disaster.

Local leaders see stakeholder involvement, early and often, as the key to successful planning. "We value the process as well as the plan," says Erin Lynch, MARC's emergency services and homeland security program director. "Bringing people together from a variety of disciplines and jurisdictions not only strengthens the plans, it strengthens our working relationships and our community."

### **Evolving expectations**

As events unfold across the nation and across the world, the expectations of federal, state and local governments related to homeland security are continually evolving. The RHSCC provides local leaders with a policy-making forum that is able to adapt to new requirements.

While the RHSCC and its subcommittees continue to develop the region's response capabilities, a strong emphasis is placed on determining how to sustain these efforts.

"We continue to work diligently to develop a better system," says Hannes Zacharias, deputy county manager in Johnson County, Kan., and RHSCC co-chair. "There are certainly some questions on the horizon about future funding. We know we will need to replace equipment and train new personnel.... It's a constant renewal and education process."

Many of the emergency responders who were on the scene at the Hyatt disaster that day in 1981 are now approaching retirement. But the lessons they learned are not forgotten.

Key among those is the knowledge that no single agency works in a vacuum. Regional coordination and cooperation don't always come easily, but the relationships built today will strengthen tomorrow's response. [HPP]

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