



Study Finds Major Gaps in Chemical Terrorism Preparedness

Public Health Laboratories Found to be “Unprepared and Overwhelmed”

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Washington, D.C., June 4, 2003 – A report released today by Trust for America’s Health (TFAH) finds that, despite warnings by homeland security officials that a chemical terrorist attack in the U.S. is a real possibility, state public health laboratories – a crucial component of our defense and response system – are dangerously unprepared to meet this challenge.

The report “Public Health Laboratories: Unprepared and Overwhelmed” examines the capabilities of the nation’s state and local public health laboratories. Together with hospitals and local health departments, public health labs serve as front-line defenders in the case of a terrorist attack.

“Public health labs are responsible for identifying the chemical weapon used in an assault, which then drives the critical treatment, containment, and clean-up decisions,” said Shelley A. Hearne, DrPH, executive director of TFAH. “Nearly two years after being overwhelmed during the anthrax attacks, labs still haven’t received the real investment needed to fix many of their deficiencies. These are not theoretical problems. Taking action toward better preparedness is key to saving lives.”

“This report is further evidence that 20 months after September 11, we are still not prepared to deal with a chemical attack,” said U.S. Senator Jon S. Corzine of New Jersey. “We need better protections in place to prevent terrorists from releasing dangerous chemicals. But we also need to be prepared to respond quickly and effectively to any attacks that do occur. As the report shows, our public health laboratories clearly need help if we expect them to be up to the task.”

The two-part report includes 1) a survey of state public health laboratory directors about their ability to respond to a hypothetical chemical weapon attack and 2) an evaluation of state laboratories’ preparedness to respond to emergencies involving three industrial chemicals that could potentially be used as chemical terror agents. The report identified the following gaps in preparedness among public health laboratories:

- Lack of clear direction and formal coordination among emergency responders;
- Lack of planning, protocols, and additional support needed in the event of emergencies;
- Lack of equipment and training required to safely handle and store samples of suspected biological or chemical agents;

- Lack of security and safeguards against exposure for laboratory personnel and emergency responders;
- Limited environmental testing capacity for chemical agents; and
- Minimal ability to test the public for exposure to chemicals, including common industrial chemicals, such as phosgene, a choking agent regularly used in pharmaceuticals, metal welding and dye manufacturing, and arsine, a blood agent used in the manufacturing of computer chips and fiber optics.

“If we have to respond to a chemical terrorism event, it will be a train wreck. Only eight state public health laboratories have a chemical terrorism response plan in place. We don’t have a national plan, or testing methods, or a lead agency for many of the laboratory activities that will be needed when a crisis occurs,” said Association of Public Health Laboratories Executive Director Scott Becker.

Trust for America’s Health recommends a serious modernization effort aimed at making our nation’s public health laboratories state-of-the-art for the 21st Century. This would require upgrading communications, staffing, equipment and facilities, and making a real commitment to increase and stabilize support at both the state and federal levels.

The report was supported by a grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. It is available on TFAH’s Web site at www.healthyamericans.org

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Trust for America’s Health is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to saving lives by protecting the health of every community and working to make disease prevention a national priority.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, based in Princeton, N.J., is the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care. It concentrates its grantmaking in four goal areas: to assure that all Americans have access to quality health care at reasonable cost; to improve the quality of care and support for people with chronic health conditions; to promote healthy communities and lifestyles; and to reduce the personal, social and economic harm caused by substance abuse - tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs.