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Extension's Role in Homeland Security: A Virginia Perspective

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Extension's Role in Homeland Security: A Virginia Perspective

Abstract

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) conducted a project designed to determine what role it might play in assisting local governments in dealing with emergency preparedness issues in the aftermath of a manmade disaster resulting from terrorist activity. The project was funded through USDA. Community forums were used to collect viewpoints and perspectives on the unique role VCE could play in providing Homeland Security educational assistance to local governments and key professionals involved in the protection of residents from a terrorist attack. Using this information, VCE has taken steps to position itself to play a key role in addressing this important issue.

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Introduction

Do you remember what you were doing around 10 a.m. on September 11, 2001? This is a day we will long remember. Given the current environment related to the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Cooperative Extension may be in a unique position to provide educational assistance related to the consequences of terrorism because of its strong presence in local communities. What role should Extension play? What is needed in the way of educational assistance? These were important questions that Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) sought to answer in this project.

EDEN (Extension Disaster Education Network) developed a USDA project to identify educational needs in the area of homeland security. As part of accomplishing that task, EDEN conducted two national surveys, one from Extension educators working in field offices and one from agricultural producers (EDEN, 2002). The results of the surveys indicated a need for Extension to be involved in this arena by setting up an informational system to provide state and local governments a way to inform and educate the public in homeland security matters.

Building upon this, VCE conducted a project that was designed to determine what role it might play in assisting local governments in dealing with emergency preparedness issues in the aftermath of a manmade disaster as a result of terrorist activity. The project was funded as a special project through USDA.

Extension can play a critical role in coordination of activities, not just during a disaster, but also before a disaster occurs, and in the period of long-term recovery after consequence management

activities. Local governments are actively engaged in safeguarding their counties and cities and most of all protecting their citizens. Many county and city major facilities require upgraded security. Local officials as well as the citizens they represent need additional information for planning emergency preparedness and implementing and managing emergency plans in case of a disaster. Extension could play an important role in providing this type of assistance.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to collect viewpoints and perspectives on the unique role VCE could play in providing Homeland Security educational assistance to local governments and key professionals involved in the protection of residents from a terrorist attack. Using this information, VCE could position itself to play a key role in addressing this important issue.

Methodology

Community forums were identified as the appropriate data collection method. They were used because they provided a way to bring key individuals together to discuss VCE's potential role in Homeland Security. By identifying local individuals who have a stake in homeland security and facilitating the discussion, VCE could be a catalyst for effective community problem solving.

VCE, through its local Extension Leadership Councils (ELC), held five community forums to determine the need for educational assistance in manmade disasters resulting from terrorist attacks. ELC's are composed of a diverse group of salaried and volunteer staff who truly own an ever-changing Cooperative Extension program in their planning area. The ELC assumes responsibility not only for identifying the needs and concerns that exist in their planning area, but shares a commitment to determining solutions, implementing them, and evaluating and reporting results. The diversity of the ELC enhances discussions, deliberations, and actions. In addition, there is a recognition that each person on the ELC brings unique experiences and information that will contribute to the Extension educational programming process.

The purpose of the community forums was to collect participants' viewpoints on the kinds of terrorist attacks they considered a threat to their community (both directly and surrounding), the kinds of preparations if any that were already underway to deal with these threats, and the kinds of educational assistance that would be needed by the community (citizens and professionals).

Data were collected from community forum participants through the use of eight key questions. Invited participants for this study included:

- Representatives from local government (counties and towns, elected and administrative);
- Public safety, local and state law enforcement, and emergency management personnel (including coordinators, fire and rescue); School personnel (public and private);
- Health care system personnel (hospitals, health departments);
- Nonprofit sector personnel (Red Cross, Autumn Care of Suffolk, Salvation Army);
- State agency personnel, including Extension and ELC members;
- Transportation system personnel, including the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel;
- Court system personnel; and
- Faith community personnel.

A total of 122 people participated in the forums.

Five community forums were conducted from May through August, 2003, in the following locations in Virginia (Figure 1): the Eastern Shore (Accomack and Northampton Counties), Powhatan County, Prince George County, City of Suffolk, and Abingdon (multi-jurisdictions - southwest Virginia).

Figure 1.
Location of Community Forums



The number of participants by site follows:

- Eastern Shore – 32
- Powhatan – 20
- Prince George County – 10
- City of Suffolk – 16
- Abingdon – 44

At the Suffolk and Prince George sites, questions were posed directly to the participants by a facilitator, with all responses recorded on flipcharts. The number of participants at the Eastern Shore, Abingdon, and Powhatan sites was of a size that participants were divided into small groups. A facilitator posed questions, with each small group responding to the questions within the group and recording their comments on a flipchart.

Community Forum Results

A summary of key results by question is presented below.

Question #1: What Kind of Terrorist Attacks, That May Happen Anywhere, Concerns You the Most?

Participants at all sites mentioned similar kinds of attacks: Biological and chemical events, disruptions to systems (utilities, communications, and transportation), contamination (water and food), and explosives. In addition, participants at the Abingdon, Prince George, and Suffolk sites were concerned about "something" happening at large public events. The Eastern Shore and Suffolk participants were concerned about an attack on the ports and military bases in the area.

Questions #2 & #3: What Types of Attacks Are You Most Concerned About That May Happen Here? From the Created List, What Are the Top Three You Are Most Concerned About?

Responses to these questions mirrored responses to the first question. But when participants were asked to choose the three types of attacks they were most concerned could happen in their communities, there were differences among sites:

- Abingdon – Contamination of water supply, including reservoir, rivers, and streams; disruption to transportation system (road/bridge/dam destruction); and attacks at public events (the races at Bristol, schools, other public events)
- Eastern Shore – Disruption to the transportation corridor, including the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel, with disruptions to the following systems: communications, nuclear war fallout, biological and chemical attacks, including the use of agricultural chemicals
- Powhatan – Disruptions at mass gatherings (schools, racetrack, military), attack on chemical plant, attack on Surry Nuclear Plant
- Prince George – Disruption to air navigation system (located in area), disruption to public utilities and communications system, including computers
- Suffolk – Biological (something happening elsewhere and moving into area), contamination of food and water supply (fallout from Surry or shipyards), and Suffolk being used as a target as a diversion to a main target elsewhere

Question #4: To Your Knowledge, What Preparations Are Already Under Way in Your County/City/Community to Deal with an Attack and Its Aftermath?

All sites reported enhanced planning efforts since the September 11, 2001 event, with more serious attention given to potential targets. There are local Emergency Planning Committees in all jurisdictions. Emergency operations plans are in place, and mock drills are being held. Schools have developed crisis plans. Health Departments working with hospitals and other health related

organizations have plans. In the eastern part of the state it was mentioned there are transportation plans on how to "move" the people in the event of a disaster. Shelters and distribution centers have been identified. The nonprofit sector and the faith communities (at some sites) have also done planning. Sites also reported the purchase of enhanced equipment/communications systems/weapony and plans for purchasing additional items when additional funds become available.

Several sites reported educational efforts that had been directed to the general public. In the Suffolk area, there is CERT training that provides information on how to help families/neighbors in emergency situations. The Health Department and Red Cross have done training for civic groups. Civic groups have been asked by fire and police departments to assist in passing information on to others. VCE has provided education on farm security and pesticide storage statewide. In general, the public was more open to the receiving of information.

Although participants reported enhanced coordination among interested parties, there was also surprise at the amount of planning that was ongoing in sectors not known to them. Multiple plans have been developed for the same geographic area focusing on separate segments of the community, i.e., law enforcement, health, civic involvement, faith communities, nonprofit sector. Participants often commented that there needed to be a coordinated effort where all planning entities would meet at least yearly to compare plans and efforts for better coordination. It was acknowledged that the two segments that appeared to be involved in cross-sector planning were emergency management and law enforcement.

Questions #5, #6, & #7: Do You Feel a Need for Information on Preparing for Dealing with Attacks and Their Aftermath? To Whom Should the Information Be Directed? In What Form Do You Think the Information Should Be Made Available?

At no site did the participants feel the need for additional information. The sense was that the information is readily available either from their state/federal counterparts or from other sources via the Web. An observer at the Abingdon forum representing a local newspaper stated she could not get the information she thought she needed for distribution to the public.

However, participants at all sites felt there was a need to provide information to the general public. As one person stated at the Suffolk site, the information that the public needs is available, but it may not be in a form (written in a technical manner or at a too high educational level or it contains too much information) that is appropriate for the public. A participant in Abingdon stated that some information is only available to key officials/agencies/organizations and the public would not have access to it. It was felt there wasn't a need to create any new information but to get available information in a form appropriate for distribution to the public and coordinate its dissemination.

Question #8: What Do You See as Extensions' Role in Supporting the Existing Efforts When Dealing with Preparation for an Attack or Following One?

There were differences in responses by site:

- Abingdon - 4-H/youth programming - develop a volunteer force to work on homeland security activities (provide curriculum and projects on disaster preparedness, prepare youth for emergency response); serve as a central information agency (pre-event); act as a liaison to other agencies; compile all emergency plans/efforts; post-event - assist emergency services by providing education and disseminating information; assist in developing volunteer educators in neighborhoods patterned after civic defense units of the 1950-60's; prepare information on food preparation/food safety in times of disasters, pesticide certification, assist with damage assessment (agriculture), facilitate forums for citizens and governments
- Eastern Shore - organize and create an information publication in partnership with all agencies relative to terrorist attacks, serve as an education resource, utilize statewide Extension system for information, develop materials for mass distribution, coordinate with other agencies to develop public information, hold educational meetings for general public, educate youth through 4-H and the schools, provide information to agricultural/farm labor population
- Powhatan - relay information to the public, damage assessment, public awareness and communication, public meetings, training, assist other organizations such as the Red Cross with shelter setup
- Prince George - provide information to deal with incorrect or misleading information, use network to get information to children and families, use the Extension network to identify funds from federal government to obtain grants to support planning and implementation efforts
- Suffolk - reach people in rural areas with information, training provided on use of food/water supplies particularly for families living with well water, water issues relative to a safe supply for livestock, use of the 4-H program to get information out, using sentinel animals, i.e., chickens as the "canary in the mine"

In summary, five key points were identified that have implications for Extension's involvement in homeland security.

1. Since September 11, 2001, all jurisdictions have enhanced their planning efforts, but it has primarily been done within "vertical silos," with each sector of the community doing their own planning, either linking into their state systems, e.g., the Health Departments or standing alone.
2. Participants were often surprised at the amount of planning that has taken place or is currently being done within their communities by various entities.
3. Participants acknowledged the need to "coordinate the plans" among all those that have or are developing plans.
4. Participants did not see a need to develop new information, but they did see a need to take existing information and convert it into a form that is appropriate for use by the general public.
5. There was variance among sites as to the role that Extension can play in supporting existing planning efforts, although all saw Extension as providing information to the general public.

Extension's Role in Virginia: Next Steps

As a result of these efforts, a Web site <<http://www.hlseduc.ext.vt.edu/>> has been established with the goal of developing materials that agents and local emergency response groups can use to access and prepare for man-made disasters. A community action plan and implementation strategies will be the primary driver for this site. The site will also contain resources and ideas to study and test as the community acts. The materials will aid in the interaction of sharing the current agency plans for homeland security and how they will impact the total action during an emergency. The Extension agent will be viewed as one of the potential facilitators of these local action and development plans, pulling resources and the expertise from the community and helping to identify potential overlaps of missions and potential gaps in responding and preparing for man-made disasters.

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