

THE BLUE BANNER



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Bioterrorism drill tests emergency officials



KINGSLEY FAIRBRIDGE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

SWAT team officers move participants away from the mock contamination site at the bioterrorism drill. Law enforcement and emergency crews from around Asheville participated in the exercise.

Successful training exercise helps improve groups' readiness

Dearborn McCorkle
 News Reporter

Local public health and safety officials participated in a multi-agency bioterrorism drill Sept. 18 at Colbond, Inc. on Inka, N.C. "What we are trying to do is make sure everybody is on the same level and knows what everybody else is doing when we come together and have to respond to an actual incident," said Jerry Vehau, Buncombe County homeland security director.

Personnel from the police, fire and sheriff departments, Buncombe County Emergency Services, Regional Response HAZMAT (Hazardous Material) Team (RRT 6), Buncombe County Health Center, Mission St. Joseph's Hospital, State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) practiced their response to a major crisis in order to fine-tune agency responsibilities and identify the need for future training. "The drill (will) determine the

readiness state the different agencies are in, and make sure we don't have any big holes in the overall procedure," said Vehau. "We will have about 10 different agencies represented here by the time (the scenario) plays out. Of course, if we find any (problems), that is what it is all about."

A steering committee designed the drill to test local health and safety agencies' preparation procedures. Only the committee members knew the details of the scenario, in order to encourage more realistic responses.

"The drill is one component of a \$9,000 Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant awarded (to) the Buncombe County Emergency Services Department by the North Carolina Division of Emergency Management," said Deborah Welch, public information officer for Buncombe County in a Sept. 16 press release.

The drill at Colbond, Inc. cost approximately \$4,000 to \$5,000, according to Vehau. The grant provided staff and

health agencies the opportunity to identify local areas that are at a high risk for terrorist activity, revise the county's emergency plan and facilitate additional training.

"We actually started this grant before Sept. 11 to get better prepared for a major crisis," said Vehau in a Sept. 16 press release. "We are all good at what we do, and practicing a coordinated effort can only make us better."

The first stage of the drill was a joint effort by the Buncombe County Sheriff Department and Asheville City Police Department. The fire department, EMS and HAZMAT ran the second stage.

"What we are doing is playing in a real-time scenario to find out how long it would take," said Vehau. "For example, law enforcement, if they were to have an actual event, it would take 20 to 30 minutes for Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams to get here. (The) fire department and EMS are staged at a different location waiting for the SWAT team to get through, so they can come in case we've got



KINGSLEY FAIRBRIDGE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

HAZMAT officials participating in the bioterrorism practice drill wore full biohazard protective suits, including breathing apparatus.

injuries or contamination."

"The majority of the command are in the orange vests watching what is going on," said Robin Nix, public information coordinator with the city of Asheville. "The second in command are the folks actually doing the work, and they don't have as much experience. So, it is really good for them to get the experience of running (an emergency scenario)."

The drill began with a call to 911 from the security gate of the factory.

At 8:55 a.m., another call was made by an unknown person from

awarehouse on Colbond property," said Nix. "This person said there was a hostage situation taking place, and an undetermined number of hostages were being held."

Three Asheville police units and two sheriff units were the first to arrive on the scene.

"We got an initial call there was some type of biochemical released in the (building), with a subject holding people hostage," said Ron King, Fire District One Commander. "(He) released some type

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Muslims face challenges

Sarah Wilkins
 Senior News Reporter

Many Muslim Americans endured challenges to their rights from their communities and governments since Sept. 11, 2001. But for the over 700 Muslim Americans who live in the Asheville area, tolerance for the Muslim faith continues to exist.

"Sept. 11 almost gave people an excuse to say it's okay to discriminate, and it's okay to hate," said Jane Fesperman, a senior psychology major. "Inside the city of Asheville, you may have a more liberal population."

Fesperman said Asheville and UNCA may represent a safe haven for Muslim Americans due to the area's liberal and tolerant reputation.

"To many Muslims, there is more support for their people," said Elmoiz Abunura, a UNCA political science lecturer and Muslim American. "It has to do with the development of Asheville itself."

Abunura believes the diverse artistic and intellectual life of Asheville is attractive to Muslim Americans.

In addition, there are many types of individuals living in the area, including hippies, hippies, retired people and Rastafarians.

"Lots of gays and lesbians (moved in) within the past 10 years, so I guess Muslims came because of the same reasons," said Abunura. "It's a tolerant place."

The general reaction of Muslim Americans in Asheville to the Sept. 11 attacks is similar to the feelings of Americans with different faiths.

"They couldn't comprehend the evil that would have conjured such terrorist acts in New York City and Washington, D.C.," said Abunura. "While some Americans blame all Muslims for Sept. 11, Muslim Americans understand that the people who committed these acts of terror are not representative of Muslims."

Fesperman asserts that Americans should accept that different people have different opinions, and different people have different goals. We need to accept and embrace diversity.

Many individuals are not exposed to a tolerant view of Islam in the mass media. Abunura said when he recently visited Europe, he noticed international media organizations do a better job of portraying Muslims.

"I think there is a regression to the understanding of Islam" through the mass media, said Abunura. People "used to think Islam was in the same family as Christianity before Sept. 11. But now, preachers, like the Rev. Franklin Graham, are stressing the issues of the differences between Islam and other religions."

In order to combat this understanding, Abunura has given over 30 presentations since Sept. 11 because he felt Muslims needed to make their opinions heard.

"The response of the audience may start to differentiate between the hijackers and the mainstream Muslims," said Abunura.

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UNC-CH resists lawsuits, upholds academic freedom

Sara Miller
 News Reporter

The UNC system board of governors approved a resolution Sept. 16 supporting academic freedom, after several months of controversy concerning the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's summer reading selection, "Approaching the Quran: The Early Revelations," written by Michael Sells.

"I do not believe the notion that we are forbidden to read or discuss religious materials," said Merritt Moseley, professor of literature and director of the UNCA honors program. "A large part of the history of the world is built on religion. We read parts of the Bible and Bhagavad Gita in Humanities 124, and parts of the Quran in (Humanities) 214."

Since May 8, when the campus press announced that Sells's book was selected, UNC-CH has been dodging lawsuits and clinging to academic freedom. The university believes academic freedom gives them the right to explore all areas of knowledge, including religion, without violating any rights.

The university asked all new students, freshmen and transfers to read the selection, write a one-page paper and attend a discussion group. According to their Web site, UNC-CH expects about 3,500 freshmen and 800 transfers each fall.

The Family Policy Network (FPN), a conservative Christian group, filed a lawsuit following this announcement, and the House of Appropriations Committee denied funding for the program unless it

taught all known religions, according to Jennifer Samuels, assistant

state and national editor.

"It is possible to teach almost any book from the point of view of advocacy, so that you are persuading students to change their convictions, membership or allegiance, but I don't think anybody has taught it that way," said Moseley.

When the house denied funding, the university upheld its academic freedom was violated.

"Academic freedom is threatened when the members of the legislature begin to tell the faculty of a great university what they can and can't teach," said Moseley. At their Aug. 9 meeting, the UNC board of governors did not approve a resolution supporting the university and its right to academic freedom.

However, a week later, a federal judge said the assignment was strictly academic and allowed the

university to hold the discussion groups.

"I have no patience with the idea that it is an indoctrination into Islam," said Moseley. "If it were, then we'd already be hearing reports of mass conversion." The university's selection put them in national spotlight. On Aug. 27, UNC-CH Chancellor James Moeser appeared on "Good Morning America" and "Nightline" with Ted Koppel.

The UNC-CH summer reading program is now in its fourth year. The school officials thought the projects of the past summers, as well as Sells's book helped the students.

Moseley said UNCA also has a summer reading program that has been in place for two years. Moseley is a member of the committee that chose the past two selections.