

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Public Health Preparedness and Response Planning Forums Texas-Mexico Border Region

The international border between Mexico and the United States stretches from San Diego, California, and Tijuana, Baja California Norte, in the west, to Matamoros, Tamaulipas, and Brownsville, Texas, in the east.

This vast area, one of the busiest and longest international borders in the world, includes four states in the United States (California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas) and six states in Mexico (Baja California Norte, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas), as well as 14 major “Sister City” pairs along the 1,951-mile border.

Texas has the longest stretch of the border of any U.S. State. The 1,254-mile Texas and Mexico border includes seven pairs of Sister Cities and two tribal nations, the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas and the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo (Tigua) American Indian tribal organization.

Texas and Mexico are bound together by ties of geography, history, and commerce. The Texas-Mexico border is a place where different nationalities, languages, and cultures come together so that our ties are not merely those of commerce and geography: they are the ties of family and friendship as well.

As neighbors, Texas and Mexico also are bound together in a common cause: to effectively prepare for and respond to any public health threat that may affect the millions of people who live along the border. Because bioterrorism and infectious diseases care nothing about borders or international protocols, Texas and Mexico public health officials have the challenge and the obligation to collaborate and jointly plan for preparedness, response, and recovery to any major public health threat along the border.

From March to September 2004, the Texas Department Health (a legacy agency of the Texas Department of State Health Services [DSHS]), the Mexican Ministry of Health (Secretaría de Salud de México), and the United States - Mexico Border Health Commission (USMBHC), sponsored seven two-day Texas - Mexico Public Health Preparedness and Response (PHPR) forums to address the challenges of bioterrorism and disaster preparedness.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public Health Preparedness and Response Planning Forums Texas-Mexico Border Region

The PHRP forums took place in the following Texas - Mexico Sister Cities (the host city is listed first):

Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua -- El Paso, Texas, March 22-23, 2004;
Piedras Negras, Coahuila -- Eagle Pass, Texas, May 6-7, 2004;
Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila -- Del Rio, Texas, May 20-21, 2004;
Laredo, Texas – Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, June 17-18, 2004;
Brownsville, Texas – Matamoros, Tamaulipas, July 15-16, 2005
Ojinaga, Chihuahua -- Presidio, Texas, August 12-13, 2004;
McAllen, Texas – Reynosa, Tamaulipas, September 29-30, 2004.

The purpose of these PHRP forums were:

- 1) to gain a better understanding of the Texas and Mexico preparedness and response plans to bioterrorism, infectious disease outbreaks, and other public health threats and emergencies, and
- 2) to enhance the partnerships and working relationships for improved coordination and collaboration of health and safety issues along the Texas -- Mexico border.

Forum participants included both Texas and Mexico representatives from hospitals, health care facilities, emergency medical services (EMS), public health departments, the military, law enforcement, customs, emergency management, and other related fields.

The forums were of critical importance for the health and safety of citizens in both Mexico and Texas. Forum participants addressed the need for rapid, around-the-clock information exchange and response coordination; the communication of risks, alerts, and interventions; and the development of joint training and exercise programs. At each forum, participants were divided into work groups to address challenges and solutions in three areas: Rapid Response; Risk Communications; Training and Education.

Following the conclusion of each forum, a “technical committee,” composed of local, binational forum participants, convened to review the forum work groups’ recommendations and to develop follow-up action steps.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public Health Preparedness and Response Planning Forums

Texas-Mexico Border Region

On March 16, 2005, representatives from the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), Mexican Ministry of Health, and USMBHC (Mexico and U.S. Sections) met in Mexico City to share an overview of the lessons learned and conclusions derived from the 2004 PHPR forums. These representatives also identified common challenges that were addressed during the forums and suggested potential solutions.

Based on these discussions, the group made the following recommendations:

- Establish a Web-based training calendar for the border area and list all available courses. Training should be binational, bilingual, and test joint risk and emergency communications between Texas and Mexico. Establish a binational training team; trainers should come from both Mexico and the United States. Establish training via video teleconference to allow federal, state, regional, and local participation.
- Conduct a needs assessment to determine training needs. Implement a course in preparedness response for physicians. Must bring training to all health sectors, not just the physicians and nurses. Provide training to volunteers. Training is needed for smallpox, the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS), patient management, family readiness, radiation, epidemiology, basic survival techniques, incident command, diagnosis of diverse illnesses, communications systems, laboratory protection systems, use of isolation and containment equipment, sample diagnosis of suspicious biological agents, and response to different disasters.
- Establish a binational, Web-based exercise calendar. Design, develop and conduct binational exercises and simulations to evaluate training and disaster preparedness. Need to have binational disaster drills at least two times a year.
- Create and distribute contact lists and integrate a directory of key players along the border. Directory should include individual positions and responsibilities, and be updated in a timely manner, at least once every six months.
- Translate materials to avoid language barriers. Communications shall include Internet, satellite telephones, cellular phones, internal radio communications, and videoconferences. Form a local workgroup or committee with professionals from both countries to determine the communication channels and joint operations for a communication network.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public Health Preparedness and Response Planning Forums

Texas-Mexico Border Region

- Risk communications in both countries should be through one spokesperson and include a backup. Subject matter experts should support spokespersons. Establish a binational point of contact for each emergency response, public health, and border agency. Provide training for the spokesperson, and a method for information verification. Define channels of communication, both internally and externally.
- Prepare joint public health announcements and standardize information systems. Develop standardized protocols and communications plan for public information, including panic control. Conduct joint media briefings. The Public Information office should be bilingual.
- Request that Texas send alerts to Mexico from the Health Alert Network (HAN), along with epidemiological information and data, so that Mexico can know what is occurring in Texas and to allow the border states of Mexico to be prepared. Establish HAN in Mexico, at the federal level, to send non-sensitive messages to the locals. Develop criteria for messages that should be shared with public health departments on both sides of the border.
- Share access to radio frequencies and ensure radio compatibility. Establish and allow for binational communications at local level, including civil protection, fire departments, medical doctors, epidemiologists, federal and state police, federal and local representatives of risk communication. Public health preparedness and response plans should be distributed to all emergency response personnel and health officials.
- Establish protocols for samples, chain of custody, and letters of agreement. Establish binational arrangements to obtain the necessary permits to freely take samples across the border in order to prevent the Customs Department of either country from blocking laboratory and human samples needed for tests during an emergency. Develop an agreement through the binational health councils to allow free movement of personnel, medicine, vaccine, materials, and equipment that are needed for a response to a binational emergency or public health event.
- Use the “Incident Scale” being developed by the Global Health Security Action Group (GHSAG) as the main strategy in risk communication.
- Present the possibility of testing developing strategies for response to public health emergencies during exercises and simulations to the GHSAG.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public Health Preparedness and Response Planning Forums

Texas-Mexico Border Region

The following is a list of accomplishment/activities that took place on the Texas-Mexico border as a result of the Public Health Preparedness and Response forums:

- Basic Epidemiology Course – Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, April – May 2004
- Basic Epidemiology Course – Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, June- July 2004
- Basic Forensic Epidemiology Training – El Paso, Texas, July 2004
- Binational Bioterrorism Tabletop Exercise – Eagle Pass, Texas, (included participants from Piedras Negras, Coahuila, and the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas), August 2004
- Binational Forensic Epidemiology and Public Health Preparedness Conference – Laredo, Texas, (included participants from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon, Mexico), August 2004
- Binational Bioterrorism Tabletop Exercise – Ojinaga, Chihuahua, (included participants from Presidio, Texas), August 2004
- Binational Bioterrorism Tabletop Exercise – Rio Grande City, Texas, (included participants from Ciudad Carmargo, Tamaulipas), August 2004
- Binational Radiological Emergency Preparedness Training – Ojinaga, Chihuahua, (included participants from Presidio, Texas), November 2004
- Dr. Pablo Kuri-Morales, General Director of the General Directorate of Epidemiology, Mexico Secretariat of Health issued a formal invitation to William Steiger, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Global Health, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to invite the CDC's Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) Director, Steven Bice and others to visit Mexico City to open a formal dialogue to improve understanding of both nations' stockpiles, as well as to improve the coordination and cooperation between the United States and Mexico for response to a border event. – Mexico City, Mexico, November 2004
- Binational Tabletop Exercise – Del Rio, Texas, (included participants from Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila), January 2005
- Binational Bioterrorism Workshop, Centro Cultural Universitario de Juarez – Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, March 2005
- Binational Tabletop Exercise – Edinburg, Texas (included participants from Reynosa, Tamaulipas), April 2005
- University of Tamaulipas School of Nursing – Presentation to the National Association of Mexican Nurses on the U.S. Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) – Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, April 2005
- Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) training information and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Ysleta del Sur Pueblo (YDSP) – Tigua American Indians, April 2005
- Presidio/Ojinaga SNS Overview – Presidio, Texas, April 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public Health Preparedness and Response Planning Forums

Texas-Mexico Border Region

- Community Partnerships and Awareness Training, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD): Homeland Security Initiative – El Paso, Texas, April 2005
- Translation of Smallpox Preparedness: Clinical Aspects Manual & Slides – Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, April 2005
- Smallpox Preparedness Training: Clinical Aspects – El Paso, Texas (included participants from Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua), April 2005
- Binational Smallpox Preparedness Training: Clinical Aspects – Presidio, Texas (included participants from Ojinaga, Chihuahua), April 2005
- Binational Tabletop Exercise – Laredo, Texas (included participants from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon, Mexico), May 2005
- University of Tamaulipas School of Nursing Conference, SNS Presentation – Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, May 2005
- Smallpox Preparedness Training: Clinical Aspects – Laredo, Texas, May 2005
- 79th Texas Legislature, Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 2 memorializing the United States Congress to enact legislation that would provide for the federal deployment of the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) within Mexico to protect U.S. border states -- Austin, Texas, May 2005
- Smallpox Preparedness Training: Clinical Aspects – Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas (included participants from Laredo, Texas), May 2005
- YDSP Council Meeting – SNS Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) - Tigua American Indians, May 2005
- Smallpox Preparedness Training: Clinical Aspects – Eagle Pass, Texas, June 2005
- Public Health Law Workshop – Harlingen, Texas, June 2005
- Smallpox Preparedness Training: Clinical Aspects – Piedras Negras, Coahuila, June 2005
- Completion of Binational Directories (contact information for key public health and emergency management representatives) for the seven Texas-Mexico “Sister Cities,” June 2005
- Binational Public Health Law Workshop – El Paso, Texas (included participants from Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo American Indian tribal organization, and New Mexico), July 2005
- Binational Smallpox Preparedness Training: Clinical Aspects – Reynosa, Tamaulipas, July 2005
- U.S.-Mexico Border Health and Infectious Disease Surveillance Conference – El Paso, Texas, July 2005
- Binational Tabletop Exercise – Weslaco, Texas (included participants from Reynosa and Matamoros, Tamaulipas), July 2005
- Binational Smallpox Preparedness Training: Clinical Aspects – Ciudad Acuña (included participants from Del Rio, Texas), July 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public Health Preparedness and Response Planning Forums

Texas-Mexico Border Region

- Binational Smallpox Preparedness Training: Clinical Aspects – Ojinaga, Chihuahua (included participants from Presidio, Texas), July 2005
- Isolation and Quarantine Workshop by the University of California Los Angeles – El Paso, Texas, July 2005
- Binational Public Health Law Workshop – Laredo, Texas (included participants from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon, Mexico), August 2005
- Binational Conference on Disease Outbreak Investigation – Laredo, Texas (included participants from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon, Mexico), August 2005
- Binational Disease Outbreak Investigation Conference – Laredo, Texas (included participants from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon, Mexico), August 2005
- Binational Radiological Emergency Preparedness Training – Laredo, Texas (included participants from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas), August 2005
- Binational Advanced Forensic Epidemiology Training – Laredo, Texas (included participants from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, and Nuevo Leon, Mexico), August 2005
- Hidalgo County –Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Second Binational Epidemiology and Surveillance Forum – Weslaco, Texas, August 2005
- 2005 Binational Conference on Surveillance and Epidemiology and Public Health Preparedness Workshop – South Padre Island, Texas, August 2005
- El Paso Regional Advisory Council (RAC) Binational Disaster Conference – El Paso, Texas (included participants from Juarez, Chihuahua), October 2005
- Work on addendum to Presidio/Ojinaga mutual aid plan regarding the sharing of emergency equipment back and forth across the Texas – Mexico border
- Binational Training - Roles of Health Professionals in the Early Detection and Response to Terrorism by the University of Louisville Center for Deterrence of Biowarfare – Harlingen, Texas (included participants from Matamoros and Reynosa, Tamaulipas), November 2005
- Smallpox Preparedness Training: Clinical Aspects – Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, December 2005
- Reactivation of Binational Health Councils, i.e. the HOPE-K Tri-National Health Council, which includes representatives from Eagle Pass, Piedras Negras, and the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas, and the Amistad Binational Health Council, which includes representatives from Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña.
- El Paso, Texas/Juarez, Chihuahua/Las Cruces, New Mexico Regional Border Infectious Disease Committee – bimonthly meetings

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Public Health Preparedness and Response Planning Forums
Texas-Mexico Border Region*

This Executive Summary does not contain each and every conclusion or recommendation identified by the binational forum participants. Additional information may be found in the Consolidated Binational Forums Recommendations or in the individual forum reports included in this package.