Mark Peterson - Host:

I'm Mark Peterson, and this is "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA."

Mark Peterson - Host:

Since the 1950s, the U.S. Army maintained stockpiles of chemical munitions that were produced as a way to deter the threat of chemical attacks from foreign adversaries. In 1985, under the direction of Congress, the Army began destroying the aging chemical weapons, while ensuring that the communities surrounding the eight stockpile sites across the country remain safe. Three years later, in 1988, an agreement was made between FEMA and the U.S. Army to establish the Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program, or CSEPP. CSEPP is a readiness program that is designed to enhance the emergency preparedness of the communities surrounding these stockpile sites, not only as it relates to the stockpile munitions, but also to any disaster. Today, stockpiles of chemical munitions remain at only two sites in the United States, and one of those sites is in Pueblo, Colorado. On today's episode, we'll learn more about Pueblo's annual CSEPP exercise - what goes into planning it and what it looks like as over 2000 local, state and federal partners come together to practice their plans in case an emergency were to occur at the Pueblo Chemical Depot. Just a quick note, the interviews for this episode were recorded in May of 2022 during the annual CSEPP exercise. Lisa Shorter, the CSEPP program coordinator for Pueblo County Colorado, has since retired from the Pueblo County Sheriff's Office. And Cheryl Layman, the FEMA Region Eight CSEPP program manager, has also since retired from FEMA.

Minh Phan:

I'm Minh Phan, with our FEMA Region Eight team in Denver, Colorado. Today we're talking about the Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program, or CSEPP for short. We're joined by three people who have valuable expertise and knowledge to share about the CSEPP program and exercise in Pueblo, Colorado. If you could share with us your name and your role with CSEPP.

Cheryl Layman:

Cheryl Lehman. I am the FEMA Region Eight CSEPP Program Manager. CSEPP stands for the Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program.

Gayle Perez:

Gail Perez. I'm the Public Information Officer for the Pueblo County Sheriff's Office and the Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program, or CSEPP.

Lisa Shorter:

I'm Lisa Shorter. I'm the Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program Coordinator for Pueblo County.

Minh Phan:

Can you tell us about CSEPP - what it is, how it came about, and your involvement with the CSEPP program?

Cheryl Layman:

So, in the late eighties, the United States signed international treaties where they agreed that the chemical weapons stockpiles that the U.S. had in place, they would destroy. When Congress signed that, they realized that the communities where these were located didn't know that part of their local Army installation might have these. And they started thinking about, "What if? How can we help the communities that surround them be prepared in case there is a chemical weapons emergency? How can they respond? How can we ensure that the public, the environment, the workers, all can be safe?".

Gayle Perez:

CSEPP is the outreach we, I like to explain it as the off-post entity to what's happening at the demilitarization that's occurring out at the Pueblo Chemical Depot. It's us preparing our community should there be an accident or incident at the depot involving the munitions, but it's even more than that because it really can go to all hazards types of activities. But, basically, letting our community that's near the depot know how to prepare, to shelter in place, to evacuate, to listen to their radios, to listen to the sirens. Anything they can do to prepare for an emergency. As a CSEPP Public Information Officer, I'm really in charge of that CSEPP program, of providing that information, the outreach to the communities through news releases, through billboards, the designing of billboards through ads, social media, anything to let the community know about preparedness, and not necessarily for the chemical weapons. that is the reason why we are here, but also for any kind of hazard - fires, floods, blizzards, anything like that. So.

Lisa Shorter:

So, I've been with the CSEPP program since about 2007, first as public information and then went into the 911 Center to manage that, and then came back to the program - like most people do, in 2019. And I'm set to close out the program. So, the Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program, that's what CSEPP stands for, and the mission of the program is just to keep the communities around the stockpiles that the Army has, safe from any sort of accident or incident. What it actually allows for though, is not just the equipment and the messaging to make that happen, but the training and the relationships that go along with all of that equipment and messaging. That's where we really see the difference. We've ended up with a really robust full scale exercise program that I would say rivals any other in the nation.

Minh Phan:

There used to be more chemical stockpile sites across the country, right?

Lisa Shorter:

That's right. There were several more, but as time went on, these other sites, they finished their stockpiles, they safely destroyed any munitions or ton containers of chemical agent they had. And what's left then, is Pueblo, Colorado and Lexington, Kentucky.

Minh Phan:

Over the years, all of you have been a part of CSEPP. Can you all share with us what it's like in terms of partnership, everyone coming together from the federal, state and local level?

Cheryl Layman:

Here in Colorado, what that looks like, it is our federal partners, the US Army installation, the Pueblo Chemical Depot, that is their higher headquarters back in Aberdeen, Maryland. This is the state of Colorado. This is Pueblo County. This is the city of Pueblo, the Pueblo Health Department, and of course the FEMA region. We are all partners and we all have a role in making sure that this program works, that we are working collectively together and that we are planning and executing what we need to do.

Lisa Shorter:

So, we like to think that we were a whole community before whole community was cool. Every year, we'll bring in the school districts. We incorporate local government. We bring in utilities.

Minh Phan:

That's really great to hear a whole community effort. And Gayle, can you talk more from the communication side, the partners that have come together to form what is called the Risk Communication Network?

Gayle Perez:

Sure. So, the majority of the people are what we call or, in what we call the Risk Communication Network. The Risk Communication Network was formed in the early 2000s. It came out of an actual emergency incident that we had here. We had a gas explosion that happened downtown and one of our PIOs, our fire department PIO, was very overwhelmed with taking calls in from - obviously from the media from all over the country, to be able to have other PIOs to step in to help out and out of that formed this risk communication network. So, it is a group of PIOs from our community and it involves every aspect of our community from the schools and hospitals to utilities, to government, to law enforcement, and it's the public information officers from all of those entities. We get together, we meet quarterly in person, and now we're starting to do, when we're not meeting quarterly, we'll meet monthly via Zoom, when we're not meeting in person, and we just coordinate. We just talk about, we have, we usually have a, some kind of a professional development presentation.

New Speaker:

We talk about best practices. We talk about lessons learned within our PIO agencies. And above all, what we're really doing is networking. We're getting to know each other. We're getting to know who is responsible for what happens out in our community. So therefore, if there is an emergency or something that happens, we know exactly who to turn to. We know that if there's a water main break and we need to put information out, who we can contact. We know who the schools, if there's should be an emergency at the schools, who to contact. So, we all know each other and that's one of the benefits of it. Out of that, the risk communication network, the majority of those people are who's gonna be making up the joint information center for the exercise, but they are also the people that we call on if we have to activate for a real world emergency as well.

Minh Phan:

It takes months and months of preparation to host something like this. Can you walk us through what it's like to plan for the CSEPP exercise?

Cheryl Layman:

Here in Colorado, planning for an exercise of this scale really happens almost a year in advance. And it starts with each jurisdiction saying, "Look, in this next exercise, here's our objective, here's what we wanna do." Maybe it's, we want to try to figure out where is our breaking point. Maybe it's we need to, we've had some training that we wanna validate and say, Hey, does that work? We have a jurisdiction that has the Pueblo County that's just updated their response plan. So, they wanted to see, "How does this plan work? Does it still work as we intended? Do the partner agencies all come together?" So, everybody figures out what it is they wanna do, their objectives. Then we figure out who are the partners that need to be involved with that kind of a response. Is that the American Red Cross? Is that our local hospitals? Is that behavioral health? Depending on again, what they wanna test and do. In the CSEPP world, there are certain things we have to do. In every single exercise, we continually validate that if there was a chemical emergency at the Pueblo Chemical Depot, that we could effectively and quickly notify the people that could be impacted by that so that we could help keep them safe. They could shelter in place, they could evacuate. That is one thing we have to do. When we figured out the, what we want to do, who we need to partner with, we start putting that exercise game plan together for how are we going to do that. What are the dates going to be? How much support do we need to bring in to do that? We start looking at what are we going to need for actors. We wanna make this seem as real as possible for everybody that is participating - whether it is the individual that's sitting in a joint information center that's gonna be taking calls from local businesses, concerned citizens, monitoring social media to help people that need information. People that would be out on scene, responding out, closing roads down, providing, assessing the situation, figuring out how do we help people get decontaminated. We start putting all of those details together to figure out what do we need to support this exercise.

Minh Phan:

Can you tell us about the components of the exercise, the mock scenarios that played out this week and how those came about?

Cheryl Layman:

So when the community provided us all of the objectives, the things that they wanted to accomplish this year and have evaluated, we then had to look at how did we create scenarios that would help them be able to demonstrate and play with those types of things. So, it began with a simulated accident at the Pueblo Chemical Depot. They were moving munitions from a storage area and during that, they had a medical emergency that resulted in three people being injured and a simulated release of chemical agent into the atmosphere. The initial modeling from that projected that there was a possibility this chemical could go beyond the chemical depot fence line and impact the community in some way. So, that's what kicked off what was happening at the depot event. Because where this chemical would've been going, there really isn't a population just immediately north of the chemical depot.

Cheryl Layman:

And, they wanted to add some complexity. We decided to give them, approximately 30 minutes later, we had a crop duster that had taken off from the local airport that was halfway through putting his chemical out on some crops that were in the area. Decided it was a beautiful flying day. He would take a loop around the area, suffered a medical emergency and crashed into a field where there were workers out in the field. So now, we have a plane crash with injured on the ground and at the same time, we had - it's a route the school bus just drive, right in front of this particular location. So, we had kids and chaperones and a bus driver on a bus that happened to be driving in an area when we have a plane crash releasing some crop dusting chemicals into the air. So again, we have to close down roads, we have to get some responders out to the scene. They've gotta size up what's happening and they've got to start handling that. Now that is very similar to what could happen in real life in that, oftentimes, it's not just one thing that might happen, but there's a second something that's happening. So, from managing an emergency, how do you put the response together, coordinate resources, make sure that everybody that's working both of those events knows that the other's going on, looks at how do they touch each other or impact each other, and how do they not? So, an example, something such as simple as understanding that what happened on the depot had no impact on why that pilot went down or the chemicals involved. Our medical responders had to be able to, as they were receiving people, understand where did this person come from? Therefore, as they needed to treat them, what was the appropriate treatment based on chemical they might have been exposed to.

Minh Phan:

And the first responders? They don't really know the situation they're walking into, do they? They go in not knowing what they'll see and then they have to assess everything and make quick decisions.

Cheryl Layman:

It really does make it more realistic. And again, part of what we try to do in exercises is make it as realistic for them. That is what they do every day. And we have some amazing professionals out there that keep you and I safe every single day. Oftentimes when that first situation happens, there is very limited information about the scope of this, how big this is, what they're gonna need to do to respond. So, they're going to initially roll the resource out there to get that initial assessment and then, based on the situation, those responders are going to notify appropriate people. They're going to ensure, like in this case, they needed to evacuate about half a mile around this plane crash because there was this simulated chemical in the air. So, it is very much mimics what happens day to day and how, in any response, it begins locally. It can often begin with very limited information about what's happening and we have to quickly size it up, call appropriate resources, and build the response.

Minh Phan:

So Lisa, as I understand it to make the exercise more realistic, there are local students from the school district who actually volunteer to have makeup put on them to simulate potential injuries that first responders can assess and treat. Can you share with us more about that?

Lisa Shorter:

6:00 AM on exercise day, we have a couple of hundred kids come and we deck them out in different forms of makeup. Say we have a compound fracture in an arm or, we have various bruises or chemical burns that we need to make sure that our field responders can treat and prioritize through triage on scene. And then, we practice transporting them, documenting that the patient can, you know, that the patient is exactly how they present in the field and that that information makes it all the way to the hospital.

Minh Phan:

How many people are here in town for the CSEPP exercise?

Cheryl Layman:

During exercise weeK, It truly takes a week of activity. So, we have had over 2000 people this week, locally, that are helping respond to this mock situation and keep our public safe and get them the information. In addition, we've had 230 some people that have come from around the nation that have a lot of expertise to be able to observe and write a report back that says, "Look, here's some things we saw looking at your planes and how you responded. Here's some things that we have seen about how you can improve along the way." There's been some coaching of people. We encourage, we love to see new people in new roles. So, an exercise is a safe place for them to get to try that for the first time and get some coaching feedback right on the site, as well. We will deliver to the community, on Monday morning, a draft report that will be almost 200 pages long, really detailed for at every single place that there was play - "Here's what we saw. And most importantly, how did that work?" We'll look at each location and then there'll also be a section of the report where we look at the community in general. So, whether it's emergency public information, there was information coming from the state, from the Pueblo Chemical Depot, from the local community - how did that work? Was it effective? Were there gaps? Did they have conflicting stories, treating and triaging people, hospitals keeping track of the patients and people? How did that work as a community? Did it come together? So, Monday morning, we'll be delivering that draft report.

Minh Phan:

So, in emergency management we have many plans for different scenarios, different emergencies, different disasters. Can you talk to us more, Cheryl, about why it's important to exercise these plans?

Cheryl Layman:

Exercises are a way that, no matter the program, whether it's CSEPP or other types of programs, agencies occasionally need to practice their plans and they need to check and make sure the plans that we built - would they work, training that we have provided, equipment that we have. If we had to respond more than just us and we had to come together as a partnership, would it all work together? Think about it much like a game or an orchestra. Usually, you're pretty good about being that individual player. You've got a game plan, but man, when it comes to game time, will it all come together? Do people know how to play together? And at the end, can we get to keeping people safe, keeping the environment safe, and making sure that, again, we've got an effective response. And that's really what exercises are about. Oftentimes, we like to see where people are trying to figure out where's our breaking point?

Cheryl Layman:

Just how much of a situation like this could we handle? And, when are we gonna get to the point of, "We've exhausted all of our resources, we need help from other partners, we need to bring them in?" Where is that point? And identify, so that on the backend, as people get the analysis of how they responded to this, they can look and see how do we continue to improve. Is that changing plans? Is that, we need some different equipment? Is that, we need to be working with different partners in the community? And the community might just not mean in the city of Pueblo or in the county. That might be with the state, with the FEMA region, with our Red Cross partners, just a hundred different ways. What do we need to do and how do we get there?

Minh Phan:

Could you all speak on the lasting legacy of the CSEPP exercise on the local community? What it's leaving behind, the capabilities that have changed and evolved over time since the CSEPP exercise has been happening here in Pueblo, Colorado?

Cheryl Layman:

CSEPP, by design, when that chemical stockpile is complete, CSEPP then, the funding for it will stop. That does not mean that emergency preparedness, all of the capabilities that have been built through the CSEPP program and the local community go away. What it means is that the funding stream that has helped them build these capabilities for quite a while goes away. Now about five years ago, the community, FEMA, the state, sat down and said, "Look, we need to start thinking about when funding goes away, how do we make sure that these capabilities we built in the community can continue because they're critical." This community has used a lot of CSEPP built capabilities during COVID, in wildfire responses, there was a bus rollover - just so many things that happen, capabilities that have been built are used and they recognize how important it is to continue that.

Cheryl Layman:

Was just talking to the CSEPP coordinator a few minutes ago, and one of the big lessons that's going to be reinforced out of this exercise is how critical it is even when CSEPP goes away, the training that CSEPP has provided and a big annual exercise where all of the community partners come together, it needs to continue. They need to figure out when the federal partners go away, how, locally, can they continue that? So about three years ago, the local community stood up an exercise planning team. They brought together police and fire and hospital and American Red Cross and a lot of their non-governmental partners together to say, "Look, we've always had a federal team that planned our exercises. We were a partner in that, but we need to learn how to do that." So for the last two years, this local planning team has mirrored the federal planning process.

Cheryl Layman:

So, just before we have a federal meeting where they're coming together, they are running the same planning processes locally. They'll get together, talk about what do we wanna do, how are we gonna do that, who needs to play, and then they'll come to the federal planning teams. COVID provided an amazing opportunity for us. Through the CSEPP program, for years, we've always used peer evaluation. So, people that were experts from other sites would come to a site that was evaluating and provide feedback. We are now down to only two sites left in CSEPP - Kentucky and Colorado. So, that pool of evaluators has gone away. But most importantly, for the locals, they needed to build their local evaluation pool. During COVID, they still had to exercise, they still needed to do that, but we couldn't bring in the federal partners to evaluate. So, we provided training on how do you evaluate, what does that look like? The first year, everybody that was locally, here, looking at things, they were local evaluators. They worked under a FEMA lead so that they kind of learned how do we write and shape a report, put it together, feed it up through the process. Last year, we took it up one notch. We were still in COVID where people couldn't travel so, we not only had local evaluators, but we had a local team lead for evaluation. So, they learned how to write, feed it to that local team lead, and then the local team lead fed it to the FEMA lead, who kind of helped them learn what does it mean to be a lead evaluator. How do you put that report together? Next year, we expect to be their final exercise just based on the D-mil schedule.

Cheryl Layman:

We're interested to hear, when we begin planning what the locals would like to do, we believe one of their objectives would be, they would like to be the lead planners. And, the federal team will support behind them and kind of help shadow, coach, that process. Because when you put an exercise together of this magnitude, with that many moving pieces and produce a report, there's a lot to it. So, if we can help leave that legacy for them and build their local exercise capability so they've got a team in place, they've got an evaluation team in place, and they know how to now manage and lead. We are excited about helping them leave that exercise legacy. And I have to tell you, it is extremely exciting to have a community and partners who understand how important exercises and training are and understanding that is something they absolutely wanna continue, even when the federal resource goes away.

Gayle Perez:

For, first and foremost is this building here and this facility that we have here. This joint information center, it's kind of the envy of a lot of people in the state. When they come down and they see our joint information center, cause we got some of the state-of-the-art technology in here. We have a great call center, as you can see, 15 stations where we can have 15 call takers. We have our own separate little media monitoring room. We have a separate work workroom for the public information officers. So, it's very well laid out and that's one of the biggest legacies, I would think. The other is just the trainings, the opportunities, the networking, the preparedness that is brought into our community. I think without CSEPP here, our community wouldn't, would not be as prepared for some of the incidents in real world incidents that we had. By having this exercise every year, we're able to exercise this joint information center, we're able to bring people in and not, maybe not, such a stressful environment as if it was a real world, to get them to practice, to get them comfortable working on the equipment, to get them comfortable working together and knowing what they're gonna do so that when that emergency does happen, we're all ready to just come in. And, it's just a well-oiled machine and it's going.

Lisa Shorter:

I would say that legacy is really important to the program. As I've watched other sites close out, we're all very afraid of what we're going to leave and whether or not it's going to continue because obviously CSEPPS staff is gone once CSEPP funding is gone, CSEPP capabilities in the way that we handle those benchmarks, communications and emergency management, fiscal soundness, you know, those are all things that have to stay. And so, we are all very vested in making sure that things like our exercise programs and our networks and our MOUs and our relationships kind of stay solid. And so, I notice, especially as we're closing out, we have 18 months left, I noticed an increased engagement and an increased ask about either what CSEPP has brought or what the community will be losing. And, I wanna say that - I wanna hope that, it's so that in the end they can find a way to fund the things that won't be funded so that the capabilities and the abilities of our first response community don't diminish at all. Years and years of trust and exercising together and preparing together and having mutual and common priorities. So, I think that the program has really set Pueblo County up to stand out well after the program leaves, to be a community that's ready to respond and protect for decades.

Minh Phan:

And as we wrap up, Cheryl, I know that this is your last year working in the CSEPP program and with the annual exercise, what has it meant for you to be part of this program to meet so many people and to know that your work has left a lasting legacy of its own?

Cheryl Layman:

I will be retiring this year on June 30th, after the true privilege of having been part of the CSEPP program from the early 1990s. I was in Oregon when the Oregon community found out their local chemical, or depot, had a chemical weapon stockpile. I Was working at the local chamber of commerce as the CEO and the business community was a little concerned, as you can imagine, when they learned something like that. Started to get to know my Army partners moved over to, in the early 1990s, actually being part of the CSEPP program and being at a local level, a member. CSEPP is a family. I think it's the only program that I've ever worked in that's had the resources, consistently, to be able to innovate, to be able to improve. And the partnerships, we are different. We don't just provide money to the local community. We, FEMA, are down here shoulder to shoulder with them, helping them build their partnerships. We are an equal partner with them, with the state, with our federal partners. I think if I had to sum it up, it's been amazing. Amazing privilege to get to watch people improve, processes improve, and to see the legacies that CSEPP has left all around the nation. It is phenomenal to see people that I saw come up in the CSEPP program that are now in leadership roles all over this nation in emergency management, helping make their communities stronger and to have even had a small snippet of an opportunity to help, whew, two communities. That's a privilege that many of us don't get. And it's, it's something that I will treasure, and I will remember. We have a saying in CSEPP. We're like the Hotel California. You can check out, but you truly never leave. And you've seen that played out here this week. You see people that grew up in the CSEPP program that are coming back to help other communities, still learn how they can improve, how they can innovate, and how they can leave that legacy. It's, it's rare and it's been a privilege.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Thanks for listening to this episode of "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA." If you'd like to learn more about this episode, or other topics, or have ideas for future episodes, visit us at fema.gov/podcast.