

An interview with Dustin Willett, Director, Emergency Management, Pennington County, South Dakota.

What is the makeup of your LEPC membership? Who (not names, but positions) are the members?

Who are members due to the job they hold in the county?

The Pennington County LEPC is an active organization with almost 50 members from 19 organizations. They have active involvement from public works, public safety, hospitals and the military, but are less successful with interested citizens and the media.

The LEPC meets quarterly at the Pennington County Emergency Operations Center. Details and agenda are organized by the emergency management office with input from the current LEPC Chair and Vice-Chair. Interspaced throughout any given year are various committee meetings, facility tours, training courses, exercises, and public education engagements.

Willet identified his top three responsibilities of the LEPC: communicating facility-specific hazardous materials risk first responders, developing improved partnerships with private industry, and elevating the general awareness of the public regarding emergency, and daily, contact with hazardous materials.

The success of the Pennington LEPC meetings can be chalked up to “good food” according to Willet. “We also make it a point to go out of our way to create a personable, casual, and light-hearted environment – for veterans, new-comers, and visitors alike. Greeting everyone with a hand shake and smile, along with sharing a laugh, goes a long way in making members feel welcome and comfortable – and seems to keep them coming back (then again, maybe it’s just the food).”

The LEPC, like many LEPCs, struggles with mission creep, recruiting members, and keeping the members engaged in projects between meetings. One of the most frequently discussed topics during meetings is where to spend the ‘ever-decreasing annual allocation of funds’ and determining if there are other sources of money available for particular projects.

How often do you meet? Where are the meetings held? Who manages the details of the meeting?

The entire membership of the Pennington County LEPC meets quarterly (February, May, August & November), at the Pennington County Emergency Operations Center. Details and agenda are organized by the emergency management office with input from the current LEPC Chair and Vice-Chair.

Interspaced throughout any given year are various committee meetings, facility tours, training courses, exercises, and public education engagements. These events are typically scheduled on an ad-hoc basis.

What is most important to the county from an emergency management point of view?

Three elements of our LEPC work that have significant importance to our local emergency management program include: 1) facility-specific hazardous materials risk communication to first responders, 2) engaging with and developing improved partnerships with private industry, and 3) elevating the general awareness of the public regarding emergency, as well as day-to-day interactions with hazardous materials.

What challenges has the LEPC faced in the recent past?

There are a few that immediately come to mind:

- Mission creep – with the group of stakeholders that gather around the LEPC table embracing all-risk and whole-community mission area models, it has been easy to stray away from the primary tasking of chemical hazard planning and risk communication as established by our federal and state-level enabling legislation. This, in and of itself, is not necessarily a problem – however when our primary deliverable (namely the Comprehensive Hazardous Materials Emergency Response Plan) becomes adversely affected we occasional need to reset and refocus to ensure the LEPC is functioning as it was intended to function in the community.
- Recruiting and retaining members of the media and private industry partners. We are seeing private industry begin to self-initiate engagement with the LEPC. We need to ensure that we are reciprocating appropriately and doing our best to accommodate the goals and objectives being brought forward by our private industry partners (as long as those goals and objectives are in general alignment with the task and purpose of the LEPC). While we can get media representative to initially sign up as members, we do not routinely see their attendance at our meetings. Our media members and partners will, however, carry our PR events advertisements when asked. There are probably a number of factors that play in to the historic lack of attendance from our media partners: 1) our local traditional media companies (TV, radio, newspaper) have downsized their field reporting staff and are stretched relatively thin and 2) we have a very active local public information officer (PIO) group that meets and trains together regularly – as many of the organizations that are represented on the LEPC have their respective PIO's engaged in our local PIO group, our traditional media partners may feel like they get an appropriate level of involvement by being active in just the local PIO organization.
- Keeping LEPC members engaged in LEPC-specific projects between our quarterly meetings. We struggle with members only thinking about and discussing LEPC issues at the quarterly meetings, and then leaving the lion's share of the work to be done by emergency management staff and the Chair and/or Vice-Chair. We utilize ad hoc and standing committees, training courses, and exercises as a partial remedy to this problem. As LEPC membership is a voluntary "collateral" duty for every member, primary job responsibilities often supersede LEPC projects. Trying to align LEPC projects with pre-existing member agency goals and objectives is one method we employ to try to keep projects from stagnating between meetings.

What topic is most frequently discussed at the LEPC meetings?

One of the most frequently discussed topics would be where to spend the ever-decreasing annual allocation of funds from the SERC. We frequently have "best bang for the buck" type of discussions and continually evaluate whether there are other sources of money available that may be better suited for use on particular projects. Tangential to these discussions is whether or not we have a reasonable percentage of covered facilities voluntarily reporting, what data or processes we could utilize to make such an estimate, and if that number should be found to be an unacceptable percentage how then would we approach identifying and compelling those orphan facilities to appropriately report.

Processes or actions you've learned to make the LEPC successful.

Food. Good food. We begin our quarterly meetings at 11:30 with a catered lunch, after eating and socializing the business portion of the meeting typically begins between noon and 12:15. Everyone is busy, but everyone must eat. Holding our LEPC meetings over the lunch hour and providing a meal has proven to be a successful formula for us. We also make it a point to go out of our way to create a personable, casual, and light-hearted environment – for veterans, new-comers, and visitors alike. Greeting everyone with a hand shake and smile, along with sharing a laugh, goes a long way in making members feel welcome and comfortable – and seems to keep them coming back (then again, maybe it's just the food). On a slightly more serious note, we've found (again, no surprise) that engaging in meaningful work results in more commitment and involvement. When a program has a direct and positive impact on local responders, residents, and visitors our LEPC members are more likely to give of themselves and the resources they have access to. Along with this, ensuring that program milestones are both predetermined and achieved in a reasonable timeframe helps to give our members a sense of accomplishment and forward progress. We always try to provide positive supporting statistics along with testimonials from the public to reaffirm with our members that the work they do is appreciated by and impactful to the community. Finally, as with any professional meeting, being respectful of everyone's time – have a reasonable agenda and stick to it.

What do you see in the future for your county from an emergency preparedness point of view?

What are you hoping to see?

I am hoping to see:

- Greater harmonization among local whole community planning efforts. We have a Haz Mat plan, a local emergency operations plan, a pre-disaster mitigation plan, land-use plans, target hazard plans, rural addressing plans, master transportation plans, city and county-level comprehensive plans (and the list goes on...) – all of which tend to stand as their own “cylinder of excellence” (because the term “silo” is so cliché...). Multiple jurisdictions, agencies, and organizations recognize the value of planning and preparedness from their specific perspective. I believe we can do a better job of talking to each other and using a more wholistic approach to developing, and more importantly deconflicting some of these plans.
- The adoption of a more disciplined risk management approach to preparedness and planning. Locally, we are seeing a greater acceptance of DHS/FEMA's Threat Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (THIRA) process and I would hope that we incorporate the THIRA process into the development and maintenance of our preparedness plans.
- A recognition in our planning and preparedness efforts that there are more mission areas than just response... While we give an occasional nod to mitigation, I believe we neglect (to some degree) the protection, prevention, and recovery mission areas. Response is important, please don't misconstrue my remarks, however our local first responder organizations do a phenomenal job of staffing, equipping, and training for their respective roles and responsibilities in the community. The LEPC is predominantly a planning entity and as such I hope and expect to realize a greater return on investment by directing more resources towards the planning/gap-analysis efforts surrounding the more under-developed mission areas (as compared to response).

- A focus on threat agnostic capability building. The development of threat-specific plans and/or annexes along with the acquisition of specialized resources can certainly have their place in preparedness. However, as we are trying to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people with a finite amount of resources I feel we should focus more on developing capability “building blocks” (perhaps as local mission-ready packages based on the emergency support function model) that can be quickly and easily adapted and activated/deployed to accomplish their respective roles in the community regardless of the nature of the threat that precipitated the need for that specific capability. Should our LEPC adopt this type of approach, a challenge would be ensuring that we stay within the prescripts of our enabling legislation, meaning a direct nexus to hazardous chemicals being transported, manufactured, stored, or used in our community while at the same time developing capabilities that have application beyond the specific threat of a chemical release.

Are there any community events the LEPC is involved in?

Absolutely! As an LEPC we place a high value on public education and engagement. Our belief is that we are more effective when we partner with other allied stakeholders in these types of events and as a result our most significant outreach programs are typically conducted in conjunction with other agencies. The two recurring community events the LEPC is involved in that immediately come to mind are the biennial household hazardous waste collection event and the annual disaster awareness day event. Additionally, we continue to develop and/or support several continually-running public awareness campaigns that target the proper disposal of chemical waste in order to protect the environment (to include our waterways and landfill).

Can you say anything about the joys of the LEPC work; pain of the LEPC work...

The joys certainly include the personal and professional relationships that are cultivated and maintained through or meetings and events – our LEPC brings together community-centric agencies and individuals who are willing to commit resources to better protect our people and our environment. While I am not inclined to go so far as to label it a pain, a frustration is the lack of ability to turn great intentions, discussions, and ideas into sustained action in a reasonable time frame. Most LEPC members have significant other responsibilities and demands on their time, so while we may have some great ideas emerge at our quarterly meetings, getting members to actually translate those ideas into actions can be very challenging.

What would you like to say....

Choose your metaphor - “How do you eat an elephant,” “The journey of 1000 miles begins with a single step,” and the list goes on. The role of the LEPC in the community is an important and worthwhile one, however the work is very rarely described as exciting, fast-paced, or immediately gratifying... Realize that maintaining a program takes a lot more commitment than building a program does and that diligence is necessary in keeping the members engaged and the organization relevant in the community. Finally, LEPC’s should not exist in a bubble. Just about every LEPC I have had the opportunity to interact with faces very similar challenges – there is tremendous benefit to networking and sharing best practices amongst the nation-wide LEPC family.