

Dear Congresswoman Fallin,

The Oklahoma County Local Emergency Planning Committee wishes to express its support for the Hazardous Materials Emergency Planning grant program in anticipation of the Hearing now set for April 22.

Our organization which is mandated under the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act, consists of dedicated volunteers including police and fire emergency response personnel, industry and environmental representatives, news media, and interested citizens of Oklahoma County. The Oklahoma County LEPC is vitally interested in the HMEP grant program run through the Pipeline Hazardous Materials Safety Administration portion of DOT. As Chairman James Oberstar and Subcommittee Chair Corrine Brown recognized in their February 13, 2009 letter to Secretary LaHood, the HMEP grants are vital to Local Emergency Planning Committees and first responders.

There have been suggestions that the HMEP program lacks focus and that increased standards need to be established to assure accountability. We also know that there have been suggestions that specific standards of capability should be applied to communities receiving HMEP monies. We believe there is confusion regarding how various types of exercises improve a community's ability to respond to hazardous materials incidents.

For each community, preparedness requires understanding the risks presented, the capabilities of the community, the needs of the public and local industries, including the transportation of hazardous materials. Local communities do not and cannot regulate the interstate transportation of hazardous materials through their areas. Instead, we must anticipate the types of accidents that might occur, their possible frequency, the level of training and types of equipment available for a response, and the degree to which vulnerable people may be impacted. What that means in each community is highly variable.

As preparedness must be based upon community-specific factors - one size does not fit all - and the community should be allowed to adapt planning, training and exercises to its situation. Additionally, communities must understand their equipment and skills for evacuations, environmental protection, protection of vulnerable populations and other factors. The incident command system must be in place and exercised with a variety of scenarios not hazardous material releases alone. To keep people fresh and alert, exercise scenarios must change from time-to-time.

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Oklahoma County LEPC Mission Statement

To enhance the protection of the community and environment from hazardous material incidents through planning, preparation and communication between citizens, business and government.

The HMEP program is a primary source of LEPC funding that is used for planning, training, and exercising responders and communities to deal with a variety of emergency situations. Its strength is in its flexibility. We agree that local emergency planning committees and first responders must be accountable for their use of the money. In our view, that means each grantee should be able to explain and measure how the projects funded with HMEP monies improved preparedness in their community. That is a vastly different concept than explaining how the monies were spent in reaching a goal set in Washington DC.

Please preserve the HMEP program as it is currently operated.

Thank you


Jonathan D. Hall
Oklahoma County LEPC, Chairman

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