

Emergency Chemical Incidents at the University of Northern Iowa CFFR Response/University Response

On September 28, 2009 Gordon Krueger from the University of Northern Iowa Environmental Health and Safety Office met with Captain Rick Schmidt of the Cedar Falls Fire Rescue Hazmat Team. The discussion focused mainly on CFFR response to emergency chemical incidents that may occur on campus. Captain Schmidt also discussed areas where the University could assist CFFR in the performance of their duties.

Emergency Response to Chemical Incidents

CFFR has specific guidelines it follows when responding to any incident at the University of Northern Iowa. These procedures are designed to protect the emergency responders as well as those directly affected.

1. Whenever a call is made where an ambulance is required, CFFR will always dispatch a unit. Their job is to make the initial assessment of the situation as well as to assist the EMT's in support of their duties.
2. If a chemical release has occurred, such as the one in McCollum July of 2008, CFFR will establish 3 zones. The first zone or hot zone is where the contamination took place. This may be a lab, an entire floor, or the building itself depending on the degree of contamination. The second or warm zone will be where CFFR determines decontamination will take place. The third or cold zone is the area is for the evacuation of personnel and emergency vehicles.
3. Injured personnel who are exposed to chemicals will be decontaminated prior to medical care. This activity is to protect individuals who provide medical treatment. EMT's and area hospitals WILL NOT provide medical care until the prescribed decontamination procedures have been performed.
4. If a major chemical release has occurred, initial response will be handled by CFFR. They will investigate the scene and determine the severity of the spill or release. Any response requiring only level B protection will be provided by the Cedar Falls Hazmat Response Unit. If level A protection is required, the Waterloo Hazmat Response Unit will also respond.

Proper Response of University Personnel to Chemical Incidents

Another concern addressed is what the initial response of university personnel should be when a chemical incident occurs. Captain Schmidt provided a list of steps to be followed after a chemical incident occurs. This will also assist CFFR in the performance of their duties.

1. Evacuate the contaminated area. As the building is evacuated it is important doors be closed so as to isolate the contamination.

2. Contact emergency responders. Do not pull fire alarms (see #4).
3. All personnel evacuated from the affected area should muster in a safe zone in order for them to be evaluated by emergency personnel for possible decontamination. These individuals could also provide vital information for firefighters to assist them in the performance of their duties. Placing evacuees in the safe zone also prevents contaminated personnel from spreading contaminants to others throughout the community. Captain Schmidt gave the white powder incident at ITC as an example where university personnel left prior to the scene being investigated by CFFR.
4. It is also important that hood ventilation remains on during a chemical incident so as to remove chemical fumes from an affected area as soon as possible. Fire alarms should not be activated in case of a chemical incident. Activation of the fire alarms will shut down the chemical fume hoods causing chemical vapors to remain in affected areas. Captain Schmidt suggested an alternative means of notifying personnel within affected areas should be discussed.