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## LESSON LEARNED

### School Emergency Planning: Including Public Information Material Distribution Procedures in Memoranda of Understanding

#### SUMMARY

School administrators should include procedures for public information material distribution into their memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with local emergency response agencies. This helps to ensure that school staff can receive and distribute critical information material to a student population after an incident.

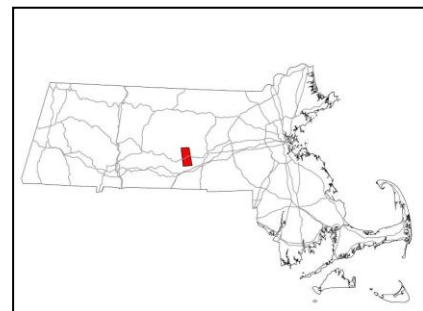
#### DESCRIPTION

On April 25, 2007, a malfunction caused the accidental release of a large amount of sodium hydroxide into the Spencer, Massachusetts, drinking water system. The system's pumps pushed the heavily contaminated water into the drinking water distribution system of Spencer before water department operators realized that an accident had occurred. Department operators notified local emergency response agencies of the contamination only 2 hours after the release. Approximately 145 residents of the town experienced skin burns and/or irritations due to exposure to the contaminated water.

A Spencer Fire Department chief declared a mass casualty incident and established incident command soon after the sodium hydroxide release was discovered. Personnel from 5 state agencies, 6 local emergency management agencies, 5 boards of health, 14 fire departments, 3 law enforcement agencies, and 36 ambulance units participated in the ensuing response operations.

During response operations, Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District administrators continued school operations and provided students with a supervised and safe environment. School staff shut down all the water sources in the schools to prevent students from using contaminated water. In addition, school administrators provided bottled water, hand sanitizer, and food to students. Finally, during the first and the third day of operations, school administrators partnered with local

The [Spencer Water Department](#) is responsible for delivering water to Spencer's businesses and 11,000 residents. Water department personnel routinely add a small amount of sodium hydroxide to the water to raise the pH level. Sodium hydroxide is a corrosive chemical that, if swallowed, can cause severe burns of mouth, throat, and stomach and death. Damage may appear days after exposure. In addition, contact with skin can cause irritation, severe burns, and scarring.



**Location of the town of  
Spencer in central  
Worcester County, MA**

response agencies to distribute flyers that informed Spencer's student population and their families of changes in incident conditions.

At the onset of response operations, school staff could not disseminate flyers with critical alert information and instructions to all the students. Fire department personnel delivered alert flyers to local schools as students were being dismissed. School staff could not distribute these flyers to all the students prior to the end of the school day. Consequently, students and their families lacked critical information soon after the incident. To expedite the distribution process, local response personnel delivered and helped school staff distribute information material to students during the last day of operations. The after action report recommends that the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District and the town of Spencer include procedures for distribution of public information material into their MOUs.

Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District is located in Central Massachusetts. The school district includes four elementary, one middle/junior high, and one secondary school. These schools provide services to approximately 2,000 students.

For additional information on school emergency planning, please also refer to the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing Best Practice [School Emergency Management Planning: Overview](#)*.

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#### CITATIONS

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Town of Spencer, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Water Department.

<http://www.spencerma.gov/tile.ez?pageId=41&actionName=display>

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