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Birnbaum Addresses Preparedness at WETP Meeting

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As Birnbaum described the accomplishments of WETP initiatives, she looked to future challenges, such as the emerging health threat posed by the H1N1 flu virus and global climate change. WETP is adapting its avian flu response program to help meet the needs of people responding to H1N1. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Early in her keynote address, Birnbaum placed WETP at the center of the NIEHS research and translation umbrella with this visual representation.



John Dunham of the Cincinnati Public Health Department conducts training onsite during the Chemical Incident Scenario Exercise that concluded the WETP Awardees Meeting and Workshop in Cincinnati. (Photo courtesy of Jim Remington)



Earth and material moving equipment operating at the exercise helped organizers simulate the sights and sounds of an actual disaster response in progress. (Photo courtesy of Jim Remington)

Director of the NIEHS and National Toxicology Program Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., took her message of hope and challenge to the Spring 2009 Worker Education and Training Program (WETP) Awardees Meeting and Workshop April 29–May 1. She welcomed and acknowledged the grant awardees on April 29 and the next day spoke to the 150 attendees gathered at the Millennium Hotel in Cincinnati. The meeting culminated on May 1 with a Chemical Incident Scenario Exercise at the nearby Riverside Transit Center that offered participants and local organizations a chance to see training, innovations and preparation put into practice.

Birnbaum expressed her support with her words and her engagement in workshop sessions, but she was unable to stay for the meeting's culminating event on May 1 — a Chemical Incident Scenario Exercise at the nearby Riverside Transit Center that offered participants and local organizations a chance to see training, innovations and preparation put into practice.

The workshop sessions and chemical spill exercise echoed the meeting's theme — “Local, State and Federal Partnerships for Chemical Preparedness and Response.” The title of Birnbaum's keynote address on April 30 was “Moving Environmental Health Sciences Forward — Community Collaboration and Partnerships,” which focused on the role of WETP within the NIEHS program structure.

Birnbaum joined WETP Director Chip Hughes, NIEHS Acting Director of Extramural Research and Training Gwen Collman, Ph.D., U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Assistant Administrator Tim Fields, EPA Office of Emergency Management Director Debbie Dietrich and Federal Bureau of Investigation Intelligence Analyst Dennis Butler at the speakers' table.

In both her talks, Birnbaum stressed that the work of WETP principal investigators "on the front lines of environmental defense... is central to the NIEHS mission" of disease prevention and promotion of public health. She praised the program's network of partnerships and the fruitful collaborations that have made WETP preparedness and response efforts possible.

"You are an important part of the NIEHS family," Birnbaum assured her audience. "The qualities that I value in an organization apply directly to this cooperative relationship [fostered by WETP] — open minds, respect for colleagues, divergent thinking, diversity, full disclosure, fairness, responsibility, accountability and a constructive, open environment that leads to genuine two-way communication." She lauded awardees for their work "where the rubber meets the road" in terms of the overall NIEHS mission of research translation from the bench to public health.

During her talk to awardees, Birnbaum outlined newly available administrative supplements made possible through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). At the conclusion of her keynote address, where she reinforced her message of partnership and inclusion, Birnbaum returned to the Katrina response mantra that informs what WETP hopes to accomplish. "To be prepared against surprise is to be trained," read her closing slide. "To be prepared for surprise is to be educated."

NIEHS WETP and the Interstate Chemical Terrorism Workgroup (ICTW) co-sponsored the meeting and workshop. Created by the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986, WETP funds through cooperative agreements non-profit organizations with a demonstrated track record of providing occupational safety and health education for development and delivery of high-quality training to workers involved in handling hazardous waste and responding to emergency releases of hazardous materials. ICTW, which was formed in 2002, is made up of public health, medical and emergency response professionals from all 50 states.

Behind the Scenes and on the Ground at the Riverside Transit Center

The WETP workshop in Cincinnati was unique among NIEHS meetings in that participants had the opportunity to witness the impact of their colleagues' research in real time. Following the keynote talks on April 30 were presentations on "Model Partnerships" and "Sharing Resources." Participants spent the afternoon in concurrent sessions and breakout sessions on specialized topics as they looked forward to the next day's Chemical Incident Scenario Exercise.

In the muted light of a massive tunnel at the Riverside Transit Center, workshop attendees witnessed the simulation of activities that would actually take place in the aftermath of a fire and explosion involving the release of large quantities of hazardous chemicals. They watched as commanders coordinated first responders from local fire departments and HAZMAT teams, who contained damage, decontaminated workers and responders, dealt with casualties, removed hazardous waste, and took other measures to ensure public

health and safety.

Workshop participants witnessed firsthand the outcomes of the intensive and innovative training programs funded by WETP. They watched as leading-edge technology developed by WETP grantees made rapid mass communication possible among the many people and different communication platforms involved in the response to the incident. People who had listened to distinguished speakers call for concerted action among a broad range of organizations now experienced the real-time coordination of resources by the partnerships fostered through the efforts of WETP and ICTW staff and representatives of unions, government agencies and non-profits.

For Hughes and WETP staff members Program Analyst Kathy Ahlmark, Industrial Hygienist Sharon Beard, Education Specialist Ted Outwater and Program Analyst Jim Remington, the exercise must have evoked memories of the program's responses to such events as the World Trade Center attack and Hurricane Katrina. What was learned there transformed the ways responders will be trained to face future disasters elsewhere, as new workers join the ranks of the more than two million trained through WETP funding.

Attendees concluded their meeting and workshop in a debriefing session back at the hotel.

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