Keep Calm and Carry On: the 2009 NEHA Sabbatical Exchange Ambassador Report

Marcy Barnett, MS, REHS

Sabbatical Goal

As an Environmental Health Specialist working with the California Department of Public Health as an emergency planner, I was interested in the NEHA sabbatical exchange program for the opportunity it affords its awardees to see how Canada and the United Kingdom utilize their environmental health workforce. Specifically, I wanted to examine the role environmental health has in the preparations being made for the 2012 Olympics Games to be held in London. I had a special interest in the emergency preparedness efforts related to the Games as my work involves promoting the integration of environmental health into the emergency response structure.

In California, environmental health services are delivered by several state agencies as well as 62 local jurisdictions. This multifaceted system tends to diminish the important role environmental health plays in disaster response and recovery operations due to the lack of a central focus and as a result, environmental health is an often overlooked resource. This situation is not unique to California as the emergency management system in the United States has traditionally focused primarily on “blue light” first responders, police, fire and emergency medical services. When an article caught my eye on involving environmental health in emergency planning, posted on the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) (NEHA’s counterpart in the UK) website, I became intrigued and used it to form the basis of my sabbatical mission.
Introduction

Not only was “Keep Calm and Carry On” the stiff-upper-lip message on the buttons given out at my presentation at the 2010 NEHA AEC, it was a theme of the entire sabbatical. In order to maximize the opportunity provided by the ambassador award, I visited London twice. First, in October 2009 to attend the “Winning at the Games” conference hosted by CIEH and again in the spring of 2010 to conduct interviews and examine the preparations being made for the Olympics.

Part one of the sabbatical went well enough except that in order to economize on my travel budget, I stayed in a crowded hostel that while well-located, I cannot recommend to anyone except the most uninhibited of heavy sleepers. It must be stressed that London is one of the most expensive cities in the world to visit; food, lodging and basic transportation are notoriously pricey in this city, so off-season travel is key to minimizing expenses. Weather should also be considered, while October and April offer relative bargains for the visitor, conditions can be cool and wet.

The second part of the sabbatical visit was planned for April however, the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland unexpectedly disrupted my plans and the plans of thousands of other travelers. Hours turned into days while I waited to see when the British airspace would reopen eventually necessitating a postponement of the trip until the following month. Once the trip was rescheduled, I minimized the uncertainty of the flight home by routing the return
through Paris; this change in itinerary allowed for a quick stop in the City of Light, a most tolerable inconvenience.

The CIEH conference on the environmental health aspects of the Games set the stage for my return visit by introducing me to several individuals who are heavily involved in the preparations including Steve Miller, Head of Public Protection for the London Borough of Newham and the Chair of the Association of London Environmental Health Managers, and Mark Du Val of the London Area Councils of Regulatory Services, the local government body responsible for overseeing regulatory authorities. I was privileged to spend time with both gentlemen on my return visit; Mr. Miller was especially gracious in granting me an extensive interview and taking me on a tour of the Olympic Village.

2012 Games

After a hard-fought selection process, London became the first third-time host for the Olympics when it was chosen in 2005 as the site of the 2012 Games over competitors that included Paris, New York, Moscow and Madrid. London’s bid for the Games was an ambitious proposal that sought to revitalize the east end of London, a formerly heavily industrialized area that is home to a culturally diverse, low income population.

The proposal promised to deliver the greenest Olympic Games to date with the creation of the largest urban park in past 150 years on derelict land along the badly degraded Lea River, complete with new riparian habitat and recreational facilities. Other features of the plan included

Author interviewing Steve Miller, Head of Public Protection for the London Borough of Newham.
a forty percent reduction in solid waste generation and water usage, a fifty percent reduction in the carbon footprint of the Games, the production of renewable energy within Olympic Village, and the remediation of 1.3 million tons of soil contaminated by a century of industrial activity.

Social, economic and environmental sustainability are evident in the “One Planet Living” theme central to the 2012 Games that will incorporate measures on climate change, waste diversion, biodiversity, inclusivity and healthy living. There will be real benefits for the local community including a new international rail station and a much needed modern shopping center along with a public education campaign that has harnessed the Olympic message to promote healthier lifestyles.

London’s bid for the Games was accepted prior to the worldwide economic downturn that has since changed the financial world and undermined the assumed funding strategy for the event. A knock on to the economic upheaval has been a turnover in political leadership in the UK that has slashed spending on public health services. Economic pressures have resulted in the participating organizations being tasked with more in a time of scarcer resources and an ever-increasing concern over the threat of terrorism.

**Threats to the Games**

One day after it was announced that London had been awarded the 2012 Games, jubilation turned to horror when a coordinated attack on London’s mass transit system killed 56 people and injured hundreds. This shocking incident was the first use of suicide bombers in the West but not the first act of terrorism.
connected to the Olympics. In 1972, eleven Israeli athletes were killed by terrorists in Munich and Atlanta’s 1996 Games were marred by a pipe bomb that killed one spectator and injured dozens of others. Consequently, the 2012 Games are considered a large and obvious target for terrorism that will pose the largest security challenge ever for peacetime Britain.

When Olympic Park opens in the summer of 2012, the eyes of world will be watching an event that draws 15,000 athletes, 70,000 workers, 20,000 media representatives and 250,000 to 500,000 spectators per day plus millions of viewers worldwide via television and the internet. In striking contrast to the 2008 summer Olympics in Beijing where the Chinese government maintained rigid security and population control, London is attempting to balance safety with a friendly and open atmosphere that will celebrate sports and international goodwill, not the latest in security measures.

Threats to the Games include the potential for terrorist use of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons as well as their more common means of mayhem – explosives detonated via suicide and car bombs. To ensure that the Games are safe for athletes and visitors, planning for terrorism and other emergencies has been underway between the Olympic Security Directorate and London authorities since the winning bid was announced. Protection of the Olympic Village food and drinking water supplies is high on the list of safety priorities, although it creates a balancing act between security and sustainability. For example, organizers would like to ban the sale of water in disposable plastic bottles and instead offer places where visitors can refill their own containers, however, water storage tanks present a vulnerability with respect to potential tampering by terrorists.

To guard against the use of explosive devices, the Olympic Village construction site has been sealed since 2007 when the work began. There is no private vehicle access allowed at the
site; the only way to view the developing village is to take a bus tour that keeps all visitors on board at all times or from a viewing platform installed on the top floor of a nearby public housing building. During the games, visitors will arrive via mass transit or on foot or by bicycle only.

There are plans in place for over 1,000 magnetoameter stations, those “mag and bag” airport-style security checkpoints, to be manned by police and volunteers monitoring incoming spectators. Security efforts will also rely heavily on the use of closed circuit TV cameras (CCTV cameras seem omnipresent in London these days). These are but a few of the many security measures planned specifically for the Games to thwart terrorism in addition to London’s ongoing resilience (terrorism) program that focuses on community recovery. The Newham Public Protection office works with the London Resiliency Forum to lead the borough’s emergency planning efforts related to the Games. This brings environmental health expertise directly into the planning process.

**Emergency Management**

The emergency management system in the UK brings together representatives from multiple organizations for complex incidents, including environmental health practitioners (EHPs). For incidents that require scientific and technical expertise, an advisory group known as a Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell (STAC) may be activated that comprises subject matter experts from a broad range of disciplines to develop specific recommendations for the incident management team. The STAC may include public and environmental health officials with expertise in food safety, water quality, industrial health and safety, hazardous materials, and decontamination working along side of other technical experts. This concept was developed in
2007 after the 2005 Buncefield oil depot fire and the 2006 polonium poisoning death of a former KGB agent highlighted a need for a coordinated system that could analyze scientific information and make decisions on public safety and environmental protection measures.

In the London, environmental health is viewed as a valuable resource that typically is the only science-based post within the local councils with the ability to assess health risk from environmental contaminants. For this reason, the local environmental health officer may function as the lead for a STAC, giving environmental health a “front seat” position that ensures it is not only incorporated into the response and recovery operations, but plays a pivotal role in planning those activities. It has not always been this way and may not be so in the more rural areas; however, in the London boroughs the EHP is a partner in emergency response, especially for CBRN and industrial incidents and in the post-disaster recovery period.

The UK employs a multi-level, colored-coded management system for emergencies: Bronze is the field level that manages work at the site of the emergency; Silver is the immediate management level that ensures that field activities are well coordinated between responding agencies; Gold level provides the strategic direction for the incident and the Platinum, also known as COBRA, level is the highest management level chaired by the Prime Minister or senior minister. If activated, a STAC could function at either the Silver or Gold levels of the system. Each London borough typically has two EHPs assigned to assist a local STAC activation. Other disaster response roles EHPs may play outside of the STAC structure are liaison officers to incident command at the Bronze, Silver or Gold levels when direct technical assistance is needed related to public health protection.
Environmental Health and the Games

As other sabbatical awardees have discovered when visiting the UK, environmental health practice is a much more inclusive discipline than typical in most of the United States. Not only are London EHPs involved with the traditional areas of concern such as food safety, our British counterparts are engaged in emergency planning, worker health and safety, transient housing, noise control issues, anti-smoking and drinking programs and other efforts to promote healthful living and sustainability.

The gathering of thousands of people for the world’s largest sporting event presents the potential for hazards beyond terrorism and accordingly, emergency planning is underway to prevent the spread of illness and conditions that threaten crowd safety. The risk of an epidemic such as influenza or measles, respiratory problems due to poor air quality and the impact of excessive heat are among the top public health concerns that have challenged officials at past Olympic events.

EHPs are involved in efforts to establish protective standards specific to the Games in addition to addressing special nuisance and vector conditions that may affect visitors from rats to bed bugs as well as dozens of other environmental health issues. To meet these needs and more, an environmental health officer from the Newham Borough is available on site at Olympic Village. Moreover, environmental health involvement does not stop with the actual Games; it is also involved with the legacy planning for what will become of the sports facilities after the athletes and crowds have gone home.
One of the difficult aspects in preparing for the 2012 Games has been the coordination of the five host boroughs in establishing a common regulatory system. The governance system in London is complex with each of the 33 boroughs’ public health council responsible for overseeing environmental health protection, often through borough-specific standards. The Olympic Village site encompasses four boroughs, therefore common standards are needed to streamline as well as to develop new requirements for such things as mobile caterers, the surveillance and reporting of gastrointestinal illnesses, and worker health and safety concerns where they currently do not exist.

Mark DuVal, Director of Policy for the London Area Councils of Regulatory Services (LACORS), and a former EHP, is leading the effort to address the lack of consistency in licensing standards and enforcement that could affect public health protection at the Games. Due to concern regarding over regulation, LACORS is currently conducting studies on the microbial and worker hygiene risks in mass food service. This data will be used to ensure that any standards developed specifically for the Games are “fit for purpose.” CIEH is also active in the effort to achieve better coordination between regulatory agencies and to more fully involve environmental health in the planning process that is expected to result in new and lasting ways to provide public health services across local authorities. This coordination will be key to achieving London’s goal of implementing world-class food safety and hygiene standards at this massive
two-week event - no small feat when you consider that almost 15 million meals are expected to be served!

There has been some collaborative success already in the area of construction noise abatement with the recent recognition of Newham’s Public Protection team for its cooperation with surrounding boroughs in keeping noise at acceptable levels for nearby residents as the almost round-the-clock “Big Build” construction continues. Steve Miller, who in addition to his duties as Head of Public Protection, leads the Joint London Area Regulatory Services, a consortium that brings the host boroughs together to work out consistency issues in public health protection. Mr. Miller notes that such coordination is well worth the effort and provides a way forward for the regulatory authorities in the current economic climate.

**Conclusion**

Preparations for the 2012 Olympics Games offer a wealth of opportunity to examine how environmental health is being incorporated into large-scale event planning and specifically, how the emergency management system utilizes this resource. While the involvement of EHPs in emergency planning and response efforts is not universal throughout the UK, in London environmental health is a recognized community resource that is part of the team. First responder agencies and health authorities recognize the EHP’s risk assessment skills and ability to manage scientific data that contribute to practical solutions to complex incidents.

The STAC model represents a less hierarchical approach to the integration scientific and technical advice into incident management decisions than the multi-agency coordination efforts often utilized as part of the Incident Command System in the US. This advisory group concept effectively brings environmental health resources into the emergency response fold in a flexible
and inclusive environment and serves as an example of a best practice that could be implemented here at the local level.

The sabbatical exchange program is an enriching experience, both professionally and personally, that I would recommend for any professional interested in improving the delivery of environmental health services. It provided me a terrific opportunity to enhance my perspective through interaction with peers in the UK with whom I continue to stay in touch. We have much to learn from our counterparts from across the country and “across the pond” making the opportunity to build international relationships that can carry us forward in our careers invaluable.

Acknowledgments

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