

No blue canaries

Implementing PPE keeps officers safe from harm

Years ago, the only personal protective equipment most departments issued to officers was several uniforms and a gun belt. Officers typically purchased their own handguns, shotguns and ballistic vests. During civil disturbances, agencies issued gas masks, riot helmets and riot batons. That was the extent of personal protection equipment (PPE) in 1974.

Today, officers on the job, who are much better equipped and serve as designated first responders, face increasing threats from terrorism and other hazards from sources such as clandestine drug laboratories. To prevent police officers from becoming “blue canaries,” law enforcement agencies must establish PPE programs and equip their officers with the proper PPE and training.

This challenge requires a new awareness and education in a range of complex issues related to PPE. Today’s law enforcement officials must:

- Know how to evaluate, select, purchase and use new tools and equipment.

- Be familiar with government standards and regulations governing the use of PPE

equipment.

- Know how government agencies test and evaluate that equipment against various hazards, including chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear hazards (CBRN).

- Know where and how to obtain federal funding for PPE in coordination with other regional law enforcement agencies and state government.

- Implement fit-testing procedures, medical evaluations, inventory control, training, a replacement cycle process, and recordkeeping process.

Meeting these requirements places additional responsibilities on the already heavy work load of law enforcement officers, trainers and administrators.

PPE’s history in law enforcement

Historically, law enforcement agencies have not given high priority to PPE issues because such equipment was considered secondary to the police officer’s primary tools — weapons, communications, ballistic vests, vehicles, cameras, etc.

In years past, gas masks were only used to temporarily protect

an officer from inadvertent tear gas exposure while responding to civil disturbances or when dislodging suspects from a building. Gas masks were usually military surplus, and fit-testing typically occurred during firearms qualifications. Often this involved donning the mask, walking into a tear gas-filled room, taking the mask off, leaving it off for a minute or two, putting it back on, and then walking out of the room. After this exercise, officers would emerge from the room heaving and tearing the masks off as they raced each other for the water hose or any other source of relief they could find. Needless to say, that unpopular and unscientific fit-testing exercise and experience would usually suffice for the rest of an officer’s law enforcement career, unless he was lucky enough to be assigned to a unit such as the SWAT team.

As far as law enforcement’s use of self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA), the first time many agencies saw the need for this equipment in police work was with the emergence of clandestine methamphetamine laboratories in the 1990s. Prior to that, most officers risked their lives, safety and

health by entering meth labs with little or no respiratory protection.

The lack of toxic threats for law enforcement is probably the main reason the need for law enforcement PPE experts has emerged so slowly. However, the situation is changing as hazmat teams begin partnering with law enforcement agencies at clan lab schools. Toxic clan labs offer the only real-life scenarios for certified clan lab officers and hazmat teams to don their PPE and practice hazardous entries, toxic chemical handling and decontamination procedures.

A long way to go

Since 2001 police agencies have taken huge steps in preparing for a terrorist event. However, police administrators and officers still state they are woefully unprepared. According to a recent survey by the International Chiefs of Police (IACP), approximately 1 percent of U.S. law enforcement officials surveyed believe they are prepared to meet these new challenges with the proper PPE equipment, expertise, training and/or experience.

One reason law enforcement officials may feel unprepared is they don't feel confident in this new area of expertise, due to limited training and exposure to information. Most officers would be unable to tell you the type of gas mask in their assigned WMD (weapons of mass destruction) kits kept in the truck of their vehicles, what hazards it protects them against, whether it meets CBRN standards, when it should be used and how it should be

maintained, etc. But they can tell you everything they need to know about their weapons.

Also, many law enforcement officials don't feel PPE is vital to their mission for a number of reasons, and, many law enforcement administrators still prefer to defer to the established (traditional) PPE experts — their fellow first responders. Fire service and hazmat teams have the knowledge, training, experience and equipment to deal with the threats from CBRN agents. This expertise has been integral with their jobs since Day 1.

Many law enforcement administrators view a PPE program as expensive and as an unnecessary,

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— *Julie Pendergast, Glendale (Arizona) Police Department*

time-consuming and administrative headache in terms of training, education, new equipment, new responsibilities and personnel scheduling.

Meeting OSHA training requirements for PPE is another hurdle law enforcement must overcome, notes police officer

Julie Pendergast, who works in the Office of Homeland Security at the Glendale (Arizona) Police Department.

“Law enforcement is already tasked heavily on grass roots training requirements such as criminal law, firearms, impact weapons, etc., and officers are off the street just to meet state requirements for proficiency and continuing education requirements,” says Pendergast. “PPE for hazmat response (clan labs/WMD incidents) has added another large component to training that is annual and continual to maintain.”

The expanding role of PPE

Law enforcement agencies cannot ignore the importance of PPE to “protect the protectors” in the face of today's new challenges and threats. Officers are routinely tasked with responding to all types of hazardous situations dealing with a range of toxic chemicals. These situations may involve chemical spills from highway and railway tankers, dismantling clandestine methamphetamine labs, investigating suspicious packages, acting as first responders to potentially toxic venues or WMD incidents, etc.

Police departments are beginning to give PPE programs more attention and have assigned officers, on a rotating basis, to become in-house experts on CBRN hazards; the selection and purchase of PPE equipment; federal funding issues; and current national PPE standards, testing and certifications. While this is a step in the right direction, a permanent

position to manage a department's PPE program better ensures the success of such a program. When officers, assigned to act as the department's PPE program coordinator on a full- or part-time basis, are promoted or rotated to other units within the department, a PPE program loses its continuity.

Some police departments are hiring full-time industrial hygienists to manage their PPE programs. Experienced industrial hygienists arrive on the law enforcement scene with a keen understanding of these areas. They know government standards concerning the use of PPE and can immediately take on the administration of the department's PPE program; apply for federal grants; and set up a compliance program with safety standards, training, equipment maintenance and certification.

Professional industrial hygienists can evaluate, select and purchase equipment; conduct fit-testing of respiratory protection; maintain the PPE inventory; and keep administrative records. Quickly, they become a valuable and worthwhile asset to a police department and relieve sworn officers of these duties.

PPE: Here to stay

The need for PPE in law enforcement is not going to go away. As threats faced by officers remain or increase, law enforcement agencies will eventually need to assume a position of leadership in the development of PPE standards and equipment.

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scene of any terrorist incident or situation involving a hazardous or toxic event. And because every terrorist or criminal event is a crime scene where critical evidence must be collected, law enforcement will be tasked with this responsibility as well; fire service and hazmat teams are not trained to investigate crimes or collect evidence. Such investigations will require trained police investigative teams to enter hot zones to photograph and collect evidence for prosecution.

Traditionally, the fire service handled hazardous material-type calls and law enforcement's primary role in these situations was to support fire department officials by securing the scene and controlling traffic, without entering the hazardous area, but the age of terrorism mandates that law enforcement expand its focus and doing so underscores the need for appropriate protective gear, Pendergast emphasizes.

“Law enforcement must now be a part of the first response to such incidents and must investigate terrorist-related incidents to

apprehend the suspects,” she explains. “This places officers in possible contaminated hazardous zones. To respond and work in hazardous chemical environments, officers must have the level of protection needed for these unknown environments to ensure their safety.”

The truth is that law enforcement officers require equipment that fits their mission. What is appropriate for firefighters (an SCBA with all the alarms and whistles) may be a burden or even a danger for police officers. Law enforcement requires a different type of respiratory protection, which in turn mandates the type of training needed and alters the eventual use of this equipment. Police require their own customized equipment, training and information about PPE.

Thus it makes sense to simply commit the time and effort toward establishing a new program that encompasses all aspects of selection, care, use, training and maintenance of respiratory protection and other safety products. Otherwise, learning is happenstance and incomplete. Lack of information about PPE is far more costly than simply embracing the inevitable. These programs ensure an agency provides its officers with the right protection to do their jobs, safely and effectively.

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