Lessons Learned about Problem Solving

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1: Recognize that correct protocols for environmental hazard remediation cannot always be followed immediately, but must be followed after the crisis.

Although the tornado touched down at the end of May, this environmental health team had a major cleanup task to do the following October:

“We got a call from an emergency manager in another county. Their initial method of chemical cleanup was: Throw all the chemicals into a 40-yard roll-off! We got the call after the chemicals had been mixing together for five months. We had to crawl through that roll-off, take out every single container, clean it out, and ship the contents off as hazardous waste.”

2: For jobs that require technical expertise, enlist experienced people.

The initial mercury decontamination effort was less than stellar, resulting in an unnecessary spread of contamination and a continued health threat:

“Some people were not adequately decontaminated, so they brought the contamination to their temporary housing. A lot of it had to do with our inexperience — not being clued in to everything we needed to do. For instance, we had a new special-operations team that had just come on board, and they kind of followed the guidelines that they had on how to decontaminate mercury, but they didn’t do it thoroughly. It was hard with these little kids, who had rubbed the stuff in their hair and thrown it at each other!

“But in retrospect, we wished that public health had been called that night. A public-health person might have assessed whether the decontamination was adequate or not. I’m sure there’s a checklist— when you do decontamination and how you determine its effectiveness before you move the people offsite where they can contaminate other areas. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, who had the mercury vapor analyzers, decided to come to the hotel to look at the exposure of the kids and test their hair—maybe to test their clothes—and when they found contamination, all of a sudden this was a big problem.”