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THREE MILE ISLAND  
Readiness for disaster still lagging  
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BY GARRY LENTON  
Of The Patriot-News

If a nuclear disaster requiring an evacuation occurred at noon tomorrow, Dauphin County emergency officials would be faced with moving 33,000 people to safety.

And those are just the ones who don't have cars -- such as schoolchildren.

The task would require 800 buses, ambulances and vans to go to 39 schools, eight nursing homes, two hospitals and possibly 48 day care centers and nursery schools within 10 miles of Three Mile Island.

But the county is about 250 vehicles short, according to its Emergency Radiological Response Procedures plan. And the number could be higher.

In addition, county officials said they don't have enough people to drive the vehicles in the event of a disaster.

There is a backup plan. If the county ran short of resources, it could ask the state for help. But the speed at which help arrives would depend on how quickly the crisis developed. A rapidly escalating event could leave up to 3,000 people, mostly children and the elderly, stranded.

"If all ... breaks loose, we'll probably be behind the curve," said Steve Shaver, acting director of the Dauphin County Emergency Management Agency.

Shaver and Dauphin County Commissioner Nick DiFrancesco expressed concerns last month about the county's ability to evacuate so-called special populations if a serious radiation release occurred at TMI.

Shaver has since softened his statement.

"It's not that bad," he said in a recent interview.

County EMAs and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency have moved to address concerns that have been circulating for more than four years, he said. Those concerns include verifying the available vehicles and evacuating children in day care.

But is he confident in his ability to evacuate children from schools and day care centers around the county's nuclear plant? No.

"I'm still concerned," he said.

Too few vehicles, drivers:

If the unthinkable happened, Dauphin County would need an additional 11 buses, 203 ambulances and 40 wheelchair-accessible vans to evacuate everyone, according to its plan, which was last updated in 2003.

"I think that's a fair and sober assessment of what the county needs to perform its assigned duties," said Eric Epstein, chairman of the watchdog group Three Mile Island Alert. "They deserve a lot of credit for stepping to the plate."

But those needs, at least for buses, might already be out of date.

The Patriot-News calculated the number of evacuees that would need rides to safety at 33,000.

It's a conservative figure based on 2005-06 school enrollment data, 2004 nursing home residency rates, a TMI Alert day care survey and county estimates.

Moving that number would require 473 buses carrying 70 people, nearly 40 more than the county has available.

The actual number could be higher, because about a third of the vehicles the county would call on seat only about 60 passengers.

Not included in the calculation are the 8,300 students in the Harrisburg School District, because most of the city's schools are outside the 10-mile radius from TMI.

Mayor Stephen R. Reed said officials should expect city residents to leave on their own if an evacuation were declared.

"You have to plan for that because it's going to happen," he said.

There is another concern as well: The county and PEMA want to ensure no buses are committed to more than one county.

Spokesmen for Capitol Trailways and Capital Area Transit, both of which have agreements with the county to provide buses in an emergency, say they have no conflicting commitments.

A bigger concern is drivers, they said. The county estimates it will need 56 more than it has, and not everybody can drive a bus.

People who drive Trailways' 45-foot-long, 14-ton buses must be certified, said Skip Becker, vice president of Capitol Bus Co.

Jim Hoffer, CAT's executive director, said his agency hopes to use a driving simulator to train emergency responders, such as fire truck drivers, how to drive buses.

Another question is how many drivers would be willing to take a bus into harm's way.

"For many years, I've tried to point out ... that we can commit vehicles, but committing the human being behind the wheel is a different kind of commitment," Hoffer said.

Becker, a veteran of the March 28, 1979, accident at TMI, agreed but said he's optimistic that few will refuse.

"People respond heroically," Becker said. "There is in all of us a care for humanity that you just cannot deny. How will that apply? Don't know, but I'm encouraged by that quality in people."

Day care evacuation plans:

Four years ago, an advertising executive was dropping his daughters off at a day care center near TMI and wondered what would happen if terrorists attacked the plant.

How would his children be evacuated? Where would they be taken?

The operator of the center didn't know.

The father, Larry Christian of New Cumberland, with help from Epstein, took his concerns to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission and Gov. Ed Rendell.

The NRC rejected Christian's petition to include day cares in emergency planning, saying it wasn't needed.

But Rendell directed the Department of Public Welfare, which licenses day care centers, to require emergency plans of all facilities. The Legislature passed a bill requiring for-profit day cares to do the same.

Neither went far enough, say Christian and Epstein, because the requirements left day care operators to provide transportation.

Over the last few months, however, PEMA began contacting day care operators near the state's five nuclear plants to ensure they had emergency plans.

The agency has been to Exelon Nuclear's Peach Bottom plant, and plans to go to FirstEnergy's Beaver Valley plant near Pittsburgh next.

After that, it plans a visit to PPL's Susquehanna plant near Berwick, said Henry Tamanini, a radiological planner at PEMA.

Day care operators are being asked how many children they have and what transportation they have available, he said. If they need something, such as a van, they are being told to ask for it.

Christian said he was encouraged by the agency's effort. "Seems like they might finally be taking our concerns seriously," he said.

But he remained chagrined that the federal government certified Pennsylvania's radiological plans for more than 20 years, even though they omitted day care centers.

Shaver credited Christian and Epstein with drawing attention to the potential gap in planning.

"It's possible that Eric's commentary prompted somebody to think, 'Hey, maybe he's right,'" Shaver said.

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