

Can your district deal with a chemical emergency?

Chemical emergencies

Toxic chemicals lurk all around schools in New Jersey in factories, pharmaceutical plants, oil refineries, military bases, water treatment plants, railcars, tank trucks, ships and oil tankers, airports, oil and gas pipelines, gas stations, farms, hospitals, laboratories, power plants, and, to a much lesser degree, even schools and offices.

A chemical emergency can occur when a toxic chemical spills, leaks, explodes, or burns and the release can harm people's safety and health. Chemical releases can be inside a school from lab, shop, cleaning, or maintenance products. The release could also be outside the school, as in the case of an industrial accident or deliberate attack.

A recent report by the New Jersey Work Environment Council (WEC), an NJEA partner, reveals that 97 sites around the state pose a potential catastrophic safety and health risk to the public if there were a "worst-case" toxic release. These facilities are located in 19 of New Jersey's 21 counties. *Still at Risk, Protecting New Jersey Jobs, Families, and Hometowns from Toxic Chemical Disasters*, available on WEC's website, www.njwec.org, lists these sites.

Evacuate, shelter in place, or prevent

Every emergency is different. People may have to evacuate or to shelter in place depending on the release's proximity, severity, and duration. Evacuation means to leave and go to a remote, safe location. This often makes the most sense if the release is inside the school.

Shelter in place means to stay indoors and close doors, windows, and vents; turn off or seal fans and ventilation systems; and wait for hazardous chemicals to blow away. Although schools are not designed to keep out toxic materials, the hope is that sealing the school will prevent the chemical from seeping inside.

In case of a major release, neither option may be truly workable or safe. The best way to address a toxic emergency is to avoid having one in the first place. WEC, along with NJEA and other allies, urges New Jersey industrial sites to reduce or eliminate the chemical hazard by making safety changes, substituting less hazardous materials, and reducing chemical storage and shipping.

Emergency agencies

State Emergency management activities are coordinated from the Office of Emergency Management, Emergency Operations Center, with State Police direction, at www.ready.nj.gov/index.html. The New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness also coordinates emergency response efforts, www.njhomelandsecurity.gov.

Local association action steps

The local association should work with its UniServ rep to ensure that districts can address chemical emergencies. Important steps include:

1. Learn the details of the district's written emergency action and fire prevention plans. Ensure they comply with Public Employee Occupational Safety and Health (PEOSH) standards.
2. Ensure training takes place for staff, students, and parents on what actions the district will take in case of emergency.
3. Examine emergency kits to ensure they contain enough nonperishable food, bottled water, battery-powered radios, first aid supplies, flashlights, batteries, duct tape, plastic sheeting, and plastic garbage bags.
4. Ensure emergency drills take place regularly.

What school districts must do

The school district is responsible for preparing for and handling emergencies. They must:

Assemble a team. Every school district must assemble a team to develop school emergency plans. They must focus on the phases of emergency management and understand how to use the Incident Command

System (ICS) as the foundation for a school emergency response plan. Using ICS, school personnel must be able to coordinate emergency activities with outside agencies such as fire, police, and hazardous materials responders. Team members should include the superintendent, principal, building and grounds, nurse, counselor, food service, and transportation coordinator.

Have written plans. PEOSH requires every school district to have written emergency action (EAP) and fire prevention (FPP) plans, both available for employee review.

The EAP must include procedures for:

- Reporting a fire or other emergency
- Emergency evacuation, including type of evacuation and exit route assignments
- Steps to be followed by employees who remain to operate critical facility operations before they evacuate
- Accounting for all employees after evacuation
- Steps to be followed by employees performing rescue or medical duties
- The name or job title of every employee who may be contacted by employees who need more information about the plan or an explanation of their duties under the plan

The FPP must include:

- A list of all major fire hazards, proper handling and storage procedures for hazardous materials, potential ignition sources and their control, and the type of fire protection equipment necessary to control each major hazard
- Procedures to control accumulations of flammable and combustible waste materials
- Procedures for regular maintenance of safeguards installed on heat-producing equipment to prevent the accidental ignition of combustible materials
- The name or job title of employees responsible for maintaining equipment to prevent or control sources of ignition or fires
- The name or job title of employees responsible for the control of fuel source hazards

PEOSH's emergency standards

- 1910.36: Design and construction of exit routes
- 1910.37: Maintenance and operation of exit routes
- 1910.38: Emergency action plans (EAP)
- 1910.39: Fire prevention plans (FPP)
- 1910.20 (q): Emergency response to hazardous substance release
- 1910.157: Portable fire extinguishers
- 1910.158: Standpipe and hose systems
- 1910.159: Automatic sprinkler systems
- 1910.160: Fire extinguishing systems
- 1910.164: Fire detection systems
- 1910.165: Employee alarm systems

Texts of these standards are online at www.osha.gov. On the right side of the homepage, under "Laws and Regulations," click on "Standards." Click on "Part 1910." Then click on the desired standard.

Websites for more information

NJ Office of Emergency Management

www.ready.nj.gov/plan/schools-daycare.html

- Schools and Day Care page

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)

www.osha.gov

- Evacuation Plans and Procedures: E-Tool (assists employers to implement an emergency action plan and comply with OSHA/PEOSH emergency standards) www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/evacuation/index.html

- Principal Emergency Response and Preparedness Requirements and Guidance www.osha.gov/Publications/osa3122.html

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/emres/default.html

- Emergency Response Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

www.bt.cdc.gov/chemical/

- Chemical Emergencies page