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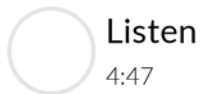
Disaster Mental Health Conference Focuses On Radiological Readiness

By ALLISON DUNNE • APR 18, 2013

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There's a conference tomorrow in New York that will focus on preparedness for nuclear disasters and other radiation emergencies. It's an opportunity to think about and plan for some worst-case scenarios.

It's the Institute for Disaster Mental Health's 10th annual conference, and this year's topic is "Radiological Readiness: Preparing for Dirty Bombs, Nuclear Disasters, and Other Radiation Emergencies." Dr. James Halpern is the director of the Institute at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

Halpern says for radiation disasters, the primary concern is a small nuclear bomb, an event he says that carries a low probability of occurring, but such high impact if it did. He adds that it is not that far a stretch to go from the kind of explosive devices used at the Boston Marathon to radiological, disbursive devices. The latter are of concern to the New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services, whose commissioner will speak at the conference, along with officials from the state's Department of Health, and Office of Mental Health.

New York Republican Congressman Chris Gibson is speaking too. He says the Boston Marathon bombing shines an even brighter light on the need to prepare for disaster, and calls the Institute for Disaster Mental Health forward-looking.

Gibson, a retired Army Colonel, has the following advice.

And he says he will offer this perspective.

He says he will also talk about trauma in the wake of such natural disasters as Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee, which impacted his 19th Congressional District.

Diane Ryan is the regional director of Disaster Mental Health and Partner Services for the American Red Cross in Greater New York Emergency Services, based in Manhattan.

She says there would be a tremendous mental health need to address fear and anxiety from a radiological event because of the unknown – whether people and places will be okay in 24 hours or several months. Ryan, whose office is around the corner from Times Square, says she will also talk about evacuation plans for Manhattan.

She says she will also address evacuation plans for the Indian Point nuclear power plant in Westchester County.

Then, says Ryan, there's the matter of public trust about information.

Other speakers will talk about such issues as medical aspects of radiological response, assisting children, and understanding post-blast human behavior. The Radiological Readiness training and conference is Friday (April 20), at SUNY New Paltz, from 9 a.m. till 4:30 p.m. The public is invited, and there is a registration fee.


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