

**Bridging the Gaps: Public Health and Radiation Emergency Preparedness Conference**

From March 21<sup>st</sup> until March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011, a group of 436 participants and distinguished speakers attended the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Radiation Studies Branch's *Bridging the Gaps: Public Health and Radiation Emergency Preparedness* conference in Atlanta, Georgia. With the earthquake, tsunami and subsequent emergency at the nuclear power plants in Japan, radiation preparedness, risk communication and response was on everyone's minds; the conference was extremely timely. The initial goal of preparing the public health and clinician workforce for radiological and nuclear terrorism incidents as a critical need of our time was never more evident.

The *Bridging the Gaps: Public Health and Radiation Emergency Preparedness* conference was initially planned to provide mass casualty education and emergency response planning resources to public health professionals, clinicians, emergency managers and planners, EMS officials and radiation control program directors. However, to meet the need for information about the Japan emergency, a late breaking session was added with a panel of CDC, NACCHO and state and local public health professionals to provide a situational assessment and to answer participants' questions. This allowed the conference to achieve the initial goals, which were to:

- Provide a forum for conference participants to discuss the current state of radiation emergency preparedness, including gaps and barriers, at the local, state, and federal levels.
- Provide a forum for conference participants to share promising practices, lessons learned, and practical applications to enhance the planning for response to, and recovery from radiation emergencies.
- Create a professional network of public health professionals and other stakeholders invested in advancing the field of radiation emergency preparedness.

The conference was very well received by the audience and did make an impact on the preparedness level for radiation emergencies. The pre-conference training day exceeded expectations, with 198 people attending the fundamentals of radiation session and 209 attending the tools for public health response training. There were 58 participants that attended the applied clinical management training for radiation emergencies.

The conference also offered participants the opportunity to participate in a demonstration of a Community Reception Center (CRC). Following a mass casualty radiation emergency, public health professionals will play a crucial role in assessing and monitoring people potentially exposed to radiation or contaminated with radioactive material. This process, called population monitoring, will be conducted in CRCs. This tour allowed participants to walk through a mock CRC and learn more about services offered at a CRC, including contamination screening, decontamination, registration, and radiation dose assessment.

Comment cards were provided throughout the conference and indicated that the audience would like more radiation emergency preparedness training in the future. Some of the important themes we heard over the course of the week include:

- Funding is needed to support radiation emergency preparedness.
- Partnership and integration across jurisdictions and planning and response entities are critical to preparedness, and must be formalized and exercised.
- Communication among these partnerships as well as to our constituencies will be essential and must also be exercised.
- We need more pilot projects to test and demonstrate useful practices that are adaptable and scalable.
- Participants want more opportunity to discuss and build regional networks.
- More accountability for radiation emergency preparedness in grant programs is desired and needed.