

Emergency Preparedness and Response: Tabletop Exercises in Public Health and General Preventive Medicine

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Background: Tabletop exercises are facilitated discussions intended to promote the evaluation of programs, policies, and procedures. Although most preventive medicine residents have participated in some aspect of COVID-19 response, many need to understand the steps in responding to an infectious disease outbreak. The goal was to ascertain whether tabletop exercises could be an effective modality using a video teleconferencing system and to meet the educational requirements for residents.

Methods: The target audience for this exercise were preventive and occupational medicine residents at Rutgers New Jersey (NJ) Medical School, faculty and others from the NJ public health community. This discussion-based exercise consisted of a two-hour multi-part program that included a pre- and post-exercise survey, reading, and interactive group discussion using an outbreak scenario.

Results: Twenty-six individuals responded to the survey; 9 residents/students and 17 faculty/staff. Thirteen (50%) had never participated/did not know what a tabletop was and thirteen (50%) had participated in one or more. Seventeen (65%) had little/no experience with outbreaks and 9 (35%) had some/more experience. Thirty-five attended the session. The exercise identified gaps in the reporting system including being able to provide proof of vaccination in a timely manner. Post-survey outcomes included learning more regarding response to potential outbreaks (23%), collaborating with new departments/organizations (25%), and participating in a tabletop exercise for the first time (21%).

Conclusions: The exercise was acknowledged as a useful learning tool by both those with and without prior training. Tabletop exercises can provide improved preparedness skills and better training for the future public health workforce. Public Health Implications: Emergency preparedness has included viewing materials online followed by an assessment. This type of learning provides knowledge about incident command and other emergency response strategies, but practice-based training can better facilitate skill building.