

# Creative Brief for Terrorist Events Involving RADIOACTIVE MATERIALS

Revised November 2004 (based on Yr. 1 & Yr. 2 data)

Project: "Targeted Pre-Event Message Development for WMD Threats" (CDC/ASPH)  
Prepared by the Disaster and Emergency Communication Research Unit, The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), School of Public Health, 530 RPHB, 1665 University Boulevard, Birmingham, AL 35294-0022 U.S.A., Principal Investigator: Dr. S.M. Becker, Tel: (205) 934-6089, Email: [smbecker@uab.edu](mailto:smbecker@uab.edu)

## 1. Target Audience

- Primary target audience is the U.S. general population
- Focus is on *terrorist incidents* involving radioactive materials
- Special concerns and information needs of ethnic/racial and other subgroups are identified throughout the creative brief

## 2. Objectives

Messaging for terrorist situations involving radioactive materials should seek to achieve, and be guided by, the following key aims:

- (1) To provide a set of simple, clear, scientifically accurate steps that individuals can take to protect themselves and their loved ones in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist incident involving radioactive materials;
- (2) To have those steps relate to all of the most likely places/situations that people might find themselves in at the time of an attack (at home, at work, at school, in the car);
- (3) To present the steps in a manner that is responsive to people's most salient concerns. Typically, health issues are central.
- (4) To make clear that the recommended protective actions are both sensible (feasible) and effective.

**Specific Protective Actions** to be included in messages include the following:

- **COVER MOUTH AND NOSE:** Recommend that people to cover their mouths and noses with a handkerchief or other cloth so as to avoid inhaling radioactive dust.
- **STAY INSIDE OR GO INSIDE AN UNDAMAGED BUILDING:** Encourage people who are already in an undamaged building to shut the windows, doors and fireplace dampers, *temporarily* shut the ventilation system, and stay there; encourage people who were caught outside during a radioactive release to quickly go to an undamaged building. (Exception: If the terrorist incident occurs inside of *your* building, go outside.)

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- **IF DRIVING, GET OFF THE ROAD, SHUT THE ENGINE, CLOSE VENTS THAT DRAW OUTSIDE AIR, COVER MOUTH AND NOSE:** Encourage people to pull over in a manner that will not block or interfere with the movement of emergency vehicles; encourage drivers to *temporarily* shut down car/truck a/c, vents, etc. to avoid taking in radioactive dust; and encourage driver and passengers to cover mouths and noses as above.
- **REMOVE DIRTY CLOTHES:** Advise anyone who has gotten dust or dirt from the incident on himself/herself to remove his/her *outer layer* of clothes, seal them in a plastic trash bag, and place the bag in a location where others will not come in contact with it.
- **SHOWER OR WASH:** Recommend that people who have gotten dust or dirt from the incident on themselves shower or wash as well as possible, and put on clean clothes.
- **DON'T TOUCH UNUSUAL DEBRIS OR GLOWING OBJECTS:** Discourage people from touching unusual metal debris, glowing objects, etc. following the incident, since these may be radioactive.
- **TUNE IN:** Recommend that people stay put and listen to the TV or radio for further information and instructions. This applies whether individuals are at home, at work, in school, or in a car.

**Note:** The protective actions noted above are intended for use *in the immediate aftermath of the incident*. They represent a series of generic steps intended to reduce the risk of exposure/inhalation of radioactive materials. Once the specific nature of the incident/threat is known, it is advisable to use a second, more detailed set of pre-developed informational materials covering such issues as whether evacuation is appropriate, hazards posed by radioactive exposure and/or contamination, symptoms of exposure, whether to seek medical care, etc.) See the final section of this creative brief (Follow-On Messages) for a brief review of key areas needing to be covered in follow-on messages.

### 3. Special Considerations and Potential Obstacles

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## General

- *Unclear or confusing terminology* – Research from the nuclear/radiological focus groups conducted as part of the Pre-Event project suggests that terms commonly found in fact sheets and other official informational materials are sometimes misunderstood by members of the public. Most notably, the phrase "shelter in place" generated a variety of conflicting understandings. It may be best, therefore, to avoid this phrase in videos, fact sheets, etc. If the term must be used, it should be simply and clearly explained so as to avoid confusion that impedes protective actions.
- *A sense that the protective measures are not "tried and true"* – Some respondents in focus groups expressed a lack of confidence in some of the protective measures, saying that there was no evidence that they really worked. (Sample quote: "Once you get radiation on you, you can wash all you want but the radiation is on you. You can take off your clothes and wash yourself all you want but the radiation is on you.") Some indication that the measures are "tried and true," complete with successful examples or support statements, would likely increase believability.
- *Conflicting information from other sources* – Such conflicts or inconsistencies can create confusion. For example, one current federal government fact sheet advises that in an RDD situation, "the most effective is to leave the affected area. Do not shelter in place." This advice (which is likely aimed at those in the most immediate area of an RDD attack) may be viewed as being in conflict with the more general advice of CDC and other agencies.
- *Dirty bombs vs. atomic bombs* – Focus group and cognitive response testing data suggest that it is crucial to have a clear explanation of dirty bombs and the difference between dirty bombs and atomic bombs.
- *Lack of a clear understanding of potassium iodide and its role* – Some focus group and interview participants indicated that people would want to know more about KI, what it does, when to use it or not use it, etc.
- *Stress and fear* – Overwhelming emotion is likely to affect many people in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack involving radioactive materials, reducing people's ability to follow complicated directions. Message simplicity and clarity are crucial.
- *Desire to leave in order to gather children, loved ones* – People's fears for the well-being of their children sometimes translated into a strong desire to go get them -- even if it required ignoring recommendations to shelter. If protective actions are to be fully effective, it is crucial that communications directly address such concerns and specifically discuss the well being of children/schools.

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## Obstacles to specific protective actions

- *Concern about lack of access to needed items* – Some individuals expressed concerns that they wouldn't have access to items such as handkerchiefs or pieces of cloth to cover their mouths and noses.
- *Modesty* – some people in focus groups expressed strong reservations about having to take off clothes if there isn't a private place in which to do it. In addition, people who are concerned about lack of availability of clean clothes may resist removing potentially contaminated clothes. To address this issue, messages must make very clear that only the outer layer of clothing is being removed, and that this step is very effective as a protective measure.
- *Concerns about the feasibility/safety of shutting down air conditioning systems* – A concern often expressed by people was that they could not shut down air conditioning systems, particularly in hot weather, without endangering the elderly, asthmatics, and others. More generally, there were concerns that having people sit in a closed up car without air conditioning on a hot day might produce suffocation or other problems.

## Obstacles related to ethnic/racial or other population groups

- *Fatalism, helplessness* – Although a degree of fatalism can be found throughout the general population, minority populations appear to exhibit a significantly higher degree ("There's nothing you can do"). This could impede protective actions. Messages can address this problem through a combination of appropriate spokespersons and an emphasis on the "tried and true" nature of protective actions.
- *Fatalism and "special equipment"* – Fatalism was often associated with the belief that gas masks or special suits were needed for self-protection, and that without them, survival was problematic.
- *Lack of trust* – Minority populations also appear to exhibit lower levels of trust in authorities. This could reduce the likelihood that official announcements would be followed or believed.
- *Prayer/spirituality* -- African-Americans mentioned prayer and spirituality as an immediate reaction to the situation far more than other population segments. It is unclear how this might affect willingness to undertake protective actions. On the one hand, it might have a calming effect, increasing people's ability to take protective measures. On the other hand, a combination of prayer and fatalism might reduce people's willingness to undertake protective measures.

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- *Homeless populations* – Homeless individuals were not clear how advice about "staying put" in a home or building applied to them.

## 4. Key Promise

- By taking a few simple steps, you can do a lot to protect yourself and your loved ones from contamination after a terrorist incident involving radioactive materials.

## 6. Tone

Serious, with a sense of urgency ("a grabber"), but also positive and empowering. The main idea is to overcome the idea that "the radiation will inevitably get us" or the belief that "there is nothing we can do," and impress upon people that a simple, easily done set of actions can significantly reduce the threat. "There are some simple things you can do to protect yourself and your family, the steps are easy to do, and doctors, scientists, research, experience, etc. shows that they work."

## 7. Media

Television & Radio; Internet; Emergency Broadcast System

## 8. Openings

It is highly likely that all news and radio stations will be providing special coverage of the unfolding event. This emergency message about protective actions will, therefore, have a wide range of openings.

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## 9. Creative Considerations

- *The accent should be on health issues* - Given that health issues are central to people's concerns, communication should be structured in a manner that clearly says to people that this message is about health and that it will help protect my loved ones and myself.
- *Messages should feature spokespersons that are credible on health issues* – Given the primacy of health issues, messages would likely benefit from having at least one speaker/spokesperson who is seen as highly credible on health issues. One possibility is the Surgeon General of the U.S. or another high credibility healthcare professional (particularly one with expertise on radiation). Use of Surgeon General or other respected healthcare figure would quickly communicate that this is serious, that it deals with health, and that the information comes from an expert (not a "politician or "bureaucrat."
- *Messages would also benefit from the inclusion of trusted local figures* – Along with respected health figures, messages should include trusted local figures (e.g. fire chief). Both types of spokesperson were identified in focus groups as being credible and trusted. The one allows messages to deal authoritatively with health issues while the other is more familiar to people.
- *Messages should make use of pictures* – People want to see pictures or illustrations that show them how to "do" protective actions. On the other hand, mock pictures of symptoms, health effects, etc. are not seen as useful.
- *Printed materials are important* - While tv and radio are often seen as the first source, many people like printed materials. Such materials can be referred to repeatedly, allowing recommendations to "sink in." Campaigns built around tv and radio should not lose sight of the value of accompanying printed materials.
- *A potential role for weather forecasters/meteorologists* - Because many people's frame of reference for emergencies is natural disasters (tornados in the South, earthquakes in the West, etc.), and because many population segments have come to trust *local* weather forecasters and *local* newscasters in such situations, the pre-developed video above needs to be complemented with a media pack that can

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quickly be given to local media. Just as the local weather person or newscaster tells people how they protect themselves during a tornado, so, too, would this trusted person provide information on appropriate protective actions.

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#### **Creative Considerations - Other recommendations**

- Use of an easy-to-remember acronym/word, with each letter standing for one of the protective actions, might be the easiest way to ensure that people can easily recall what steps they should take. This can be particularly helpful in the context of a crisis, where people are anxious, under stress, etc. An alternative would be to use some sort of rhyming words.
- Need videos and media packets to be available in English and Spanish. Also need appropriate materials for hearing impaired people.

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## **10. Follow-On Messages**

As noted on page two of the creative brief, protective actions covered here are intended for use in the immediate aftermath of the incident. Once messages relating to them have been disseminated/broadcast, there will soon after be a need for a second set of messages more specifically keyed to the specific nature of the terrorist incident. Pre-developed informational materials will also be important for these follow-on messages.

While this second set of messages requires preparation of a separate Creative Brief, findings from the "Radiation" focus groups provide some useful guidelines:

What did people indicate should be included in messages?

- Information about "symptoms" of exposure to radiation/radioactive contamination
- Guidance on whether and when they need to seek medical care
- Where to go for medical care
- Where to find more information
- What to do to protect pets
- What to do if your children are in school
- More on potassium iodide
- How long the event/the radiation will last