

DDJC Fire Department Stocks High Tech HazMat Equipment

A 22-foot mobile trailer getting outfitted as an on-scene command post and stocked with the latest chemical detection equipment has been the envy of the emergency response neighborhood.



DDJC Fire Captain Kris Walton demonstrates how the Travelir Hazardous Chemical Identifier can analyze up to 4,000 substances and provide results in less than three minutes. Located in a command post trailer, the detector is the state-of-the-art in identifying unknown gas, solid or liquid products.

“Many agencies throughout the county and state, including the Office of Emergency Services, have inquired about our specialized equipment,” said Defense Distribution Depot San Joaquin, CA (DDJC) Fire Chief Terrance Wyler. “It appears the DDJC Fire Department is somewhat of a benchmark in this new and specialized field.”

Six different detectors are used to analyze any kind of chemical in the form of a gas, liquid or solid substance, including nerve agents, anthrax, ricin, explosives and even common household items.

Although the trailer is still under construction, the detection devices stored there get plenty of action. The latest occurred when DDJC firefighters responded to a call at a Tracy, CA bank. The ATM had apparently been sprayed with a lubricant similar to WD-40. A customer using the ATM machine touched his eye, producing an immediate burning sensation.

But until the fire department analyzed the contaminant, it was treated as a worst case scenario.

Responding to a hazardous material incident calls for the opposite strategy of fighting fires, said DDJC Fire Captain Kris Walton.

“You want to take your time, using a very methodical approach,” said Walton. “It is a long process with a long checklist. You want to make sure you have the right personal protective equipment. When you are fighting a fire, you want to extinguish the flames as quickly as possible.”

One of the most sophisticated detectors is the Travelir Hazardous Chemical Identifier. It can identify more than 4,000 substances in less than three minutes. It also provides exposure effects and strategies to handle the hazard.

“It will tell you everything you wanted to know about the chemical,” said Walton. “It is our crown jewel.”

According to Walton, training is continual on the equipment and the devices are usually calibrated monthly. The Travelir manufacturer provided two full days of training followed by another eight-hour session.

In addition to the detection devices, the trailer also stocks a portable weather station, special hazardous response suits and decontamination equipment. Plans call for the trailer to be outfitted with special communication equipment including radios and computers.

“We want to be able to use it as a joint command center,” said Wyler. “Usually when we respond, there is also police and sometimes other agencies involved, so we can work together.”

Routinely, calls come in from other fire departments throughout the state wanting to know about a piece of equipment and how it is working.

“We have always been ahead of the power curve on hazmat response in the way of equipment and training,” said Walton.

In San Joaquin County’s Homeland Security Program, DDJC’s Fire Department was ranked among those with the highest level of capabilities.

“DDJC Team Fire has been out there for some time now,” said Wyler, referring to the visibility in the public sector. “We enjoy working closely and training with the many outstanding professional agencies that make up the San Joaquin County Emergency Services Group. The goal of this collaboration is to function as one team offering our collective customers the highest quality of care and assistance for their tax dollar.”