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June 2, 2009 - Statement by Vermont Health Commissioner Wendy Davis, MD

Good morning.

What I am about to tell you relates to a situation that has been invented for the purpose of exercising our emergency radiological health response capacities.

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Two days ago, on the morning of Sunday, May 31, there were two explosions in the Capital Area of downtown Albany, New York.

As a result of the blasts, six people who were in the immediate area were killed, and many more were injured during this event.

Our hearts are with the loved ones of those who lost their lives, and with those who were hurt in the explosion. Here in Vermont we have pledged to do all we can to help New Yorkers recover from this terrible event.

Several hours after the blasts, we learned that a Radiological Dispersal Device, also known as a “dirty bomb” was the cause of both explosions. A dirty bomb is constructed to spread a limited amount of radioactive material with explosives.

A dirty bomb is NOT an atomic or a nuclear bomb. Unless you were in the immediate area of the blasts, it is unlikely you were contaminated enough to cause any harm.

But this was clearly an act of terrorism, and New York and federal authorities are investigating.

I want to summarize for you what we, in the Vermont Department of Health, along with our partner agencies in the state — and the other New England states — and the federal government have been doing over the past 48 hours to look out for the health and safety of Vermonters and visitors to our state.

I want to make it clear that at this time anyone who is in Vermont is NOT in immediate danger.

At the first alert of the events in New York, we immediately activated our emergency response plans and called upon our partner agencies for aid.

We have been in close contact with our counterparts in New York, and have offered them any aid that they may need. I know that Gov. Jim Douglas has reached out to Gov. Patterson.

On Sunday and Monday, U.S. Department of Energy aircraft with special radiation detection instruments made flights over New York and Vermont to map contamination.

The maps show the highest levels of contamination in the New York counties of Albany and Rensselaer, and far lower amounts — near normal or background levels — across the border in Vermont.

It is now known that the radioactive materials released in the blasts are cesium-137 and americium-241. Experts in Vermont have the specialized equipment and skill to detect contamination on the ground.

In the western part of the state — particularly Bennington, Rutland and Addison counties — members of the Vermont Hazardous Materials response team have been making direct measurements of the environment, and taking samples of vegetation, water, milk, foods and animal feeds for laboratory analysis.

I can tell you that preliminary results are encouraging. Few of the radiation measures are above normal background levels. Preliminary field measurements of environmental samples also show only very low levels of contamination.

And starting today, samples of food sources for people and animals will be collected from the area for analysis.

To help with this effort, the State of Connecticut has sent its mobile radiological laboratory, which is now in Vermont, with expert staff and specialized instruments to measure and analyze possible contamination to the food supply.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 1 has also sent in more than 50 radiological emergency response specialists.

These teams join the Vermont Department of Health, the Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets, the Agency of Natural Resources, the Department of Labor, and the 15th Civil Support Team.

All will work together over the coming days and weeks in an extensive campaign to ensure the health and safety of our people, our environment, and our products.

This work will be managed by the radiological health experts and coordinated through the Health Operations Center here at the Health Department offices in Burlington.

We are devoting our full energy to this situation — as I know they are doing in New York.

This work will take some time, but we have a team of experts here, and I know Vermonters will pull together and help each other, as we always do.

For now, the Health Department is advising people in Rutland, Bennington, and Addison counties to avoid eating food or food products that have been out in the open and may have been contaminated by very low levels of radiation.

I'll briefly go over those recommendations now:

- Packaged foods in unopened cans, jars, bottles and bags will be safe to eat. Wash the outside of the container before opening it.
- Foods covered and stored in freezers, refrigerators and pantries should be safe as well.
- Produce from gardens and orchards, or wild foods, should not be eaten for now, until determined to be safe.
- Most water supplies come from protected underground wells, or large bodies of water where any contamination is going to be diluted, and so should be safe to drink.
- If you have any doubt, do not eat or drink suspect foods or food products or feed them to your pets or livestock.
- For those in the affected areas, continue to wash often, take daily showers, change into clean clothes, and take shoes off before coming inside. Help children (and pets) do the same.

And again, I want to remind anyone who was in the Albany, New York area at the time of the blasts, to call the Health Department at 800-439-8550 -- or dial 2-1-1. If you were in the area at the time, we want to talk to you about any actions you should take and any health concerns you may have.

We know that New York has seen significant disruption. For now, we are advising Vermonters not travel to Albany City, or Albany or Rensselaer counties in New York until it's we know it's safe.

Finally, we ask everyone to stay tuned to TV or radio for the most current information about the situation. For everyone, we are adding much more extensive information at our web site -- go to healthvermont.gov, or dial 2-1-1 for assistance in any language.

For health care providers, we have links to information that you will want to know.

And if you have children who are aware of these events, they may be understandably troubled. Please talk to them and let them know that everyone in government and in our communities are working together to make sure that children and their pets and families are safe.

I want to give a special thank you and recognition to all of our partner agencies who have pulled together so quickly and professionally to respond to this crisis. On behalf of all Vermonters, thank you!

And now I will take questions.