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Associate Director of Program Operations Certified for Emergency Exercises Virtual Medical Campus's Mark Fischer, receives MEP certification from Emergency Management Institute

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Adding to a long list of credentials, former firefighter and current Associate Director of Program Operations at West Virginia University Virtual Medical Campus (VMC[®]), Mark Fischer is one of less than a hundred non-federal employees to be certified nationally as a Master Exercise Practitioner (MEP) through the Emergency Management Institute (EMI), a department of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Being MEP certified will help Fischer assist in establishing the VMC and the area as leaders in emergency management specifically regarding terrorism preparedness.

On October 7, 2004, Mark completed the residency program for the MEP certification. The program included several online courses and three week-long sessions broken up by proficiency assignments at FEMA's National Emergency Training Center (NETC) in Emmitsburg, Md. Mark is currently the only non-federal MEP representing West Virginia in Region III (Washington, D.C., Del., Md., Pa., Va., W.Va.).

The MEP was created by FEMA to specifically recognize those individuals who have completed prescribed training and demonstrated, through hands-on application, a high level of professionalism and capability in the arena of emergency management exercises. This entails improving the capabilities in the design, conduct, evaluation, and follow-up of developing emergency management exercises and exercise programs for the respective jurisdiction's agencies and/or other organizations they represent.

The VMC[®] was established to provide training and educational resources to ensure responders locally and nationwide are better prepared when acts of terror and other disasters arise. VMC was established in 1999 and has grown in significance following the terrorist attacks against the United States in 2001.

Since its inception, the VMC has been a pioneer in the field of preparedness knowledge resources and training for first responders, such as firefighters, police officers, hospital administration/staff, and public health professionals, to be better prepared in the event of a terrorist attack. It currently offers three free comprehensive online courses made possible by a bioterrorism training grant from the Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration (DHHS/HRSA). The courses were designed to prepare public health professionals of all levels -- from maintenance to upper level administrative staff -- on preparedness and mitigation in the event of a biological, nuclear, chemical, or incendiary attack on a facility or in the region.

The VMC also facilitates table-top, functional, and full-scale exercises with area organizations like West Virginia University, the West Virginia Office of Emergency Response, and the Department of Homeland Security/Office of Domestic Preparedness. VMC is slated to provide five exercises in West Virginia under the DHHS/HRSA grant and Fischer will act as exercise facilitator.

A growing focus for the VMC is what role public health workers and public health facilities will play if there is another terrorist attack on America. Until recently, "Public Health has not been a prime focus," says Fischer of the role of first responders and terrorism. "Used to be, we looked at the situation and we said 'what do we know?' and 'what's our experience?' And then the world changed [on 9-11]. What we have to say now is 'what is possible?' By doing these exercises, we're building a general awareness, especially with non-traditional responders (i.e. public health workers). By rehearsing the plan we can begin to expect the unexpected."

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