

9-11 thrust training center to forefront of homeland security

By **DAVID GREBE**
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It can't happen in America. That's what Kem Bennett, vice chancellor and dean of engineering at Texas A&M University, said he was told by leaders across the country about the possibility of terrorist attack.

That was before Sept. 11, 2001, when Bennett was director of the National Emergency Response and Rescue Training Center, or NERRTC, at A&M. Since then, NERRTC has emerged as a major player in safeguarding the nation by helping thousands of local agencies and first responders deal with the prospect of a terrorist attack.

"We need to do more, absolutely, but the systems are there?"

KEM BENNETT
Vice chancellor and dean of engineering at Texas A&M

"After 9-11, the phone started ringing, and it would not stop," Bennett said.

So far, the agency's 23-member staff has traveled to all 50 states and beyond to train more than 60,000 first responders. They've been to 3,734 cities, counties and other jurisdictions.

When the agency was founded in 1998, its budget



Eagle photo/Butch Ireland

Bill May, director of the National Emergency Response and Rescue Training Center at Texas A&M University, sits Wednesday at a disaster training site. The training center has been getting more federal money since the Sept. 11 attacks.

was a mere \$800,000. Today, that figure has swelled to more than \$30 million in federal funds for training and technical assistance.

NERRTC is a "matrix organization," said Bill May, who now directs the organiza-

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tion. That means it doesn't respond to terrorist acts but instead trains first responders to react in case the unthinkable happens.

A first responder, in Bennett's terminology, includes anyone "sitting at the table" where decisions are made during a calamity. That includes utility directors, local officials and emergency workers.

NERRTC trains them how to interact with federal agencies likely to descend on a disaster site. First responders also gain basic knowledge on what to do in the event of a specific type of attack and who to call for help. The agency even trains local officials on how to handle things when national media swoop into town.

As the agency "ramps up," Bennett said, it will be able to train 40,000 people annually starting next year.

NERRTC is part of the Texas Engineering Extension Service, or TEEEX, a member agency of the A&M System. TEEEX's "Disaster City" complex on the A&M campus allows emergency workers to learn how to respond to incidents using real derailed trains, life-sized collapsed structures and fires.

Bennett said he was inspired, if that's the proper word, to create NERRTC after the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

"When I turned on CNN and I saw that, I knew we were not prepared," Bennett said.

But when he and other A&M officials first started walking the halls of the U.S. Capitol to find funding for the concept, there wasn't a lot of response. Bennett credits U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, for working to get the project off the ground in 1998.

Hutchison still supports the center, sponsoring an amendment that gave the agency its 2003 training budget of \$20 million.

Now, A&M is waiting to learn whether it will be chosen as headquarters of a new federal research center into terrorism prevention. Such a center would study whether anti-terrorism measures — such as face-recognition tech-

nology — actually work.

It's unknown when the federal government will make its decision, May said, or how much funding will be involved.

Disaster training isn't the only aspect of preparedness in which TEEEX is involved.

The agency also developed a system to distribute federally funded disaster-preparedness equipment more effectively. The program is used by each state to determine which communities are likeliest to need specific aid.

After Sept. 11, Bennett traveled with Texas Task Force 1, an elite urban search-and-rescue team operated by TEEEX, to look for possible survivors at the World Trade Center site.

If an event on the scale of Sept. 11 happens again, some

things would certainly be different, Bennett said.

First, emergency command posts wouldn't be set up in the lobby of an attacked building, as was done at the World Trade Center. Terrorism likely would be the first suspicion, not the second or third. Finally, Bennett said, there wouldn't be nearly as many casualties among fire and police personnel.

While no one can say if or when an attack similar to Sept. 11 will happen again, officials at Texas A&M say they're working to make sure the nation is better prepared.

"We need to do more, absolutely, but the systems are there," Bennett said.

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