The Record

Trying to stay a step ahead of terrorists

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Robert McFadden spent much of Monday at Fairleigh Dickinson University trying to convince fellow anti-terrorism experts that a gray metal tube connected to a gray metal box was just the machine they needed.

As humble as it looked, the suitcase-sized device can detect a "dirty" bomb - an explosive device designed to spread radiation - in a large area, such as an airport, and alert authorities to its whereabouts.

It was one of a few new pieces of technology on display at FDU's Homeland Security Conference in Teaneck. The event drew 50 terrorism experts, mostly from New Jersey, who spent the day discussing the latest advances in security measures.

"We found the best recipe is to bring together those who are directly involved in policy planning, education, training and public awareness," said Ronald Calissi, an associate dean who helped arrange the conference. "If they don't get involved, it's a lost cause. You're continually treading water just to stay even."

A munitions expert described how suicide bombers are trained and what type of explosives are available to them.

A Rutgers University professor displayed a computer program that ran evacuation simulations to determine the best plan for an institution.

Five members of the New Jersey State Police Hazmat Unit demonstrated how a remote-controlled machine that resembled a miniature tank could retrieve a bag of anthrax by having it latch onto a bottle of water.

"A lot of things here people have read about, but it gives you new perspective when you spend face-to-face time with experts in the field," said Stan Lapidow, a member of a state task force that is developing a plan for New Jersey to prepare for, respond to and recover from terrorist attacks.

Many of the 12 seminars focused on threats to ground transportation after the bombings in the London Underground and last year's bombings on trains in Madrid.

"During 9/11, it was all airplanes," Lapidow said. "Now, it's bridges, tunnels and trains because of everything that's happened."

It's also hospitals.

Mohsen Jafari, a Rutgers professor, displayed a computer program that shows simulations of an evacuation at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital's emergency room.

Computer-animated nurses walked around corridors like zombies as a fire erupted in a room. Soon, they were pushing patients in hospital beds and wheelchairs into elevators. The patient traffic bottlenecked while waiting for the elevators. It took 31 minutes to evacuate 107 patients, the average patient population for one floor.

Emergency Medical Service instructors discussed how they increased training for chemical and biological attacks to 35 hours from 12 in recent years.

"You used to have to hook [students] into paying attention when we talked about chemical attacks," said Terry Hoben, an adjunct professor at Union County College. "After 9/11, you didn't need to. They really concentrated on it."

Likewise, McFadden's $17,000 radiation detector was well-received when he showed what it found during his first few minutes in the Garden State.

He turned on the Mobile Detect machine as soon as he got into his rental car at Newark Liberty International

Airport on Sunday. Twenty-four hours later, a computer map showed his trip around the airport's perimeter followed by a green line - meaning there was a low level of radiation in the area.

"Now put this in a police car, and you have a mobile radiation detection unit," McFadden said. "The response to an incident can be much faster."

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