Guidelines for Writing After Action Reports and Improvement Plans

Wanda Reiter Kintz, Ph.D.
Emergency Preparedness Coordinator
State Hygienic Laboratory at the University of Iowa

An after action report and improvement plan should be written for each exercise and event that occurs for the public health laboratory. The important issue is to honestly evaluate the exercise or event, as well as to determine what protocols, etc. need to be remedied in order to improve on the response. In order to avoid "reinventing the wheel," the State Hygienic Laboratory uses a modified version of the HSEEP template for after action reports. The after action report should contain the following information:

1. A cover page clearly marked with the exercise or incident name, publication date, and organization
2. Handling instructions, which should contain the document title, classification (for official use only, etc.), and point(s) of contact
3. A table of contents
4. An executive summary with clearly stated objectives of the exercise, major strengths, and primary areas for maintenance and improvement
5. Exercise overview
   - Exercise name
   - Type of exercise
   - Start and end dates
   - Duration
   - Location
   - Sponsor
   - Capability or capabilities (i.e., Capability 12 – Public Health Laboratory Testing)
   - Scenario type
   - Exercise planning team
   - Participating personnel and organizations

6. Exercise summary
    - Exercise purpose and design
    - Exercise objectives, capabilities, and activities,
    - Scenario summary
7. Analysis of capabilities and recommendations for improvement
8. Conclusion
9. Appendices
    - Improvement plan matrix
    - Lessons learned (optional)
    - Participant feedback summary (optional)
    - Exercise events summary table (optional)
    - Performance rating (optional)
    - List of acronyms

The HSEEP template has recently been updated, and it is a more streamlined version than the 2007 template. A copy of the new version is attached, but otherwise, it can be found at the following web site: https://www.llis.dhs.gov/content/aar-ip-template

Writing after action reports gets easier after you become familiar with the process. I have developed templates for all of the public health emergency preparedness (PHEP) performance measures, which makes reporting significantly easier and less time-consuming. I also include the organization logo, a watermark for classification purposes, and a digital signature on the after action report.