

Ann Arbor News “Your World” Submission for 1/29/07:

The Washtenaw County Home Toxics Reduction Program, located at 705 N. Zeeb Road, has been providing a safe and reliable place for residents to bring their household hazardous waste since 1988. By keeping citizens informed about the choices and responsibilities associated with purchasing, handling and disposing of toxic substances, this program has been able to deal with toxic chemicals on a house-by-house basis.

But what about dealing with toxic chemicals on an industrial scale? Chemicals travel on our roadways, railways, and through the mail on a daily basis, providing commodities to local industries. Our heavy reliance on fuel and chemicals – dangerous to human and environmental health should they escape their containers – has given rise to the need for HazMat teams.

The Washtenaw County HazMat team was formed 12 years ago in response to several incidences of chemical spills in Washtenaw County where response time was slow because of the need for private contractors to deal with them. Consisting of 45 firefighters from 24 local fire departments, HazMat members must go through extensive training – 80 hours the first year – and 8 hours each year thereafter – to obtain and maintain certification.

Since its inception, the team has responded to an average of 12 incidences per year. Responsible for anything from inspecting white powders and other suspicious substances that may show up in the mail to securing the scene when trucks carrying toxic chemicals overturn on the highway, the Washtenaw County HazMat team is essential for providing safety and security for residents.

While funded partly through federal and local tax dollars, this is not enough to cover the \$1 million of high-tech gear the team uses. Some equipment is donated and fundraisers help pay for required training. Labor costs are more complicated. Although a “cost recovery ordinance” allows the team to bill the generator of the spill after the clean-up is complete, it is not always known who is responsible, as in the case of the anthrax scare following 9-11.

For more information on the Washtenaw County HazMat team, contact your local fire department. To find out more about the Household Hazardous Waste Drop-off Site visit <http://recycle.ewashtenaw.org/hometoxics> or call 734.222.6874.

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