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EPA's silence on hazard opens old wound for city

By Casey Bukro
Environment writer

"My grandson came to me and said there were men outside in white suits," said Vermel McGue, a Northwest Side resident, recalling how she discovered her neighborhood contained a toxic chemical hazard.

She walked outside of her home, at 1318 N. Artesian Ave., and came face-to-face with men in anticontamination clothing and respirators cleaning up the A-Chem Corp. plant at 1322 N. Western Ave., which had been swept by fire five months earlier.

"When you see things like that, it scares you," she said. "You think that can't happen here. We weren't notified of the danger of chemicals or hazardous material. Nobody knew anything."

The men in white suits gave the first clue that something was terribly wrong at A-Chem, which neighbors had thought was a harmless soap factory.

In fact, the plant produced chemicals for the electroplating industry, and some of those chemicals, including cyanide, sulfuric acid and hydrochloric acid, were highly dangerous.

After the first fire, on Jan. 26, the plant was boarded up. But vandals tore down the wooden barricades, children reportedly played in the charred ruins and car thieves used the site as a chop shop.

But on June 3, a second fire made it clear that the A-Chem plant was a menace.

Anger swept the largely Hispanic community, triggering renewed concerns over Chicago's ability to cope with such a crisis—and over its ability to warn residents of a possible chemical danger.

The incident underscored once again that thousands of abandoned or shuttered factories and storefronts in Chicago could be harboring such threats, though experts say the extent of the danger is unknown. No agency is charged with making such investigations.

In handling the incident, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency apparently violated its own emergency guidelines, which call for a formal community relations plan whenever toxic chemical removal operations last at least 45 days.

"That fell totally through," said Jon Grand, public relations manager for the EPA's regional office in Chicago. "It was not handled the way we handle our normal community relations. I don't have a reason or an excuse for it. My staff screwed up."

But other EPA officials, reasoning that the clean-up should not take more than 45 days, say the agency acted properly in not notifying the public. The problem, they say, is that the clean-up was not done after the first fire.

The current clean-up, which began June 11, is expected to be finished by mid-July, a cost of $100,000.

Tribune photo by Walter Kale

Dorothy Maeda, a neighbor of the A-Chem Corp. plant on North Western Avenue, makes her feelings about the plant's toxic chemicals known to Atty. Gen. Neal Hartigan, who visited the area with Ald. Luis Gutierrez [26th] Saturday to meet with residents.

Ald. Bobby Rush [2d], chairman of the Chicago City Council Committee on Environmental Protection, said there is plenty of blame to go around in the handling of A-Chem, and the problem goes much deeper than public notification.

"It caught the City of Chicago with its pants down," Rush said. "The mechanism does not exist for the city to identify firms and companies that deal with toxic materials.

"And if toxic materials are discovered, the mechanism does not exist to remove those toxic materials."

Part of the fault, he said, lies in the absence of a city agency to deal with chemical hazards. The city's Department of Environmental Control was disbanded by Mayor Jane Byrne in 1979, and only a remnant of the agency exists today in the Department of Consumer Services.

And that remnant, the city's Energy and Environmental Protection Division, lacks the staffing to do what needs to be done, says its director, John Evanoff.

A search of thousands of abandoned industrial buildings and storefronts is badly needed to determine which ones contain hazardous chemical wastes, Evanoff said. But he said his department lacks the manpower and budget to inspect the buildings.

Of the A-Chem plant, Evanoff said: "It is one of those that possibly could have been found through routine inspection procedures."

Rush said he will suggest to Mayor Harold Washington the creation of "some type of coordinating unit to deal with the toxic issue."

The need for such an agency seemed to emerge in remarks by city, state and federal officials before 70 angry residents late Thursday in a meeting at the Sure Foundation Church, 1300 N. Artesian Ave.

Residents described a series of explosions at A-Chem during the Jan. 23 fire, dense smoke that engulfed homes and sheets of ice mixed with chemicals that washed into streets after firefighters doused the flames with water.

"After the fire," why weren't we told about the dangers of these chemicals?" asked Irene Rodriguez, 3004 W. Armitage Ave.

Lt. Francis Moriarity of the Chicago Fire Department said firefighters were having their own troubles. A-Chem officials, he said, could not provide an inventory of chemicals at the scene and the Illinois EPA could not be reached by telephone for guidance.

"I called three times and had no success," Moriarity said. Then he called the federal EPA, and Stephen Browning, an on-scene coordinator, was dispatched.

The most immediate hazard was chemical-tainted water in the streets, Browning said. The federal EPA agreed to clean the streets, and A-Chem's owner, identified as John Pauga, agreed to clean out the plant's interior, Browning said. But, he said, Pauga died soon afterward.

Browning said he was not aware until he returned to the scene after the second fire that it had not been cleaned. At that time, Browning said, he found drums of chemicals fuming and the burned-out plant open to trespassers. Wooden barricades had been torn down by vandals.

Illinois Atty. Gen. Neil Hartigan Saturday repeated assurances that the barrels containing waste would be removed, the soil near the site tested and medical exams made for any concerned residents.