

# Railroad's training for emergency responders is infrequent and not always convenient [Lancaster Watchdog]

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Published: LNP | LancasterOnline

Aug. 13, 2023

Late last month, Norfolk Southern [hosted three days of safety training in Harrisburg](#) for emergency responders from across central Pennsylvania. The training provided by the company, [which owns railroads stretching across the state and Lancaster County](#), is designed to familiarize firefighters and other responders with the types of railroad cars and other equipment that they may encounter in an emergency situation.

Firefighters receive 24 hours of hazardous materials training their first year of service and 6 to 8 hours every year after through local county and state initiatives, said Randall Gockley, president of the Lancaster County Firemen's Association. The association represents more than 80 organizations and more than 750 members in the county.

But Norfolk Southern's Operation Awareness and Response training program is intended to build on that instruction. It employs a "safety train" — a specially outfitted train that includes classroom rail cars and different types of tanker cars.

No responders from Lancaster County were at the Harrisburg training on the day that an LNP | LancasterOnline reporter and photographer were there. Only a handful of responders from the county attended on one of the other two days, according to emergency response officials who spoke with The Watchdog.

How and when the company provides these training sessions is a major question in the wake of the Feb. 3 derailment in East

Palestine, Ohio, near the Pennsylvania border. The incident resulted in the intentional release and burning of toxic vinyl chloride and the evacuation of more than a thousand residents and drew scrutiny of Norfolk Southern's operations from federal and state lawmakers.

An LNP | LancasterOnline investigation published last month showed that first responders in Lancaster County rarely, if ever, receive advance notice of trains carrying hazardous materials and that the lack of information could potentially put first responders in danger.

So, The Watchdog wondered: How frequently does Norfolk Southern provide its safety training to responders in the county, and do responders believe the training is valuable?

Local responders all agreed: The hands-on sessions are important for familiarizing themselves with the different types of rolling stock.

"The more we can learn about, in this case train cars, enhances our ability to be able to respond better to an emergency," said Jay Barninger, emergency management coordinator for Columbia. "The more you know about something, the better equipped you'll be when the time occurs."

Norfolk Southern said the training provides "railroad 101" information like how an emergency crew can identify where they are on a railroad line — an important piece of information akin to a mile-marker on a highway. Emergency personnel also learn how best to contact company representatives to coordinate a response.

Additionally, the training teaches tank car identification and instruction on valves and fittings found on different types of tank cars. The company noted that the training serves another important purpose: Putting names to faces so first responders and Norfolk Southern personnel get familiar with each other.

The Watchdog called around and found only two people from the county who attended the July training in Harrisburg — the police and fire chiefs from Columbia.

Representatives of four other agencies, including the Lancaster County Emergency Management Agency, said they did not attend. The Watchdog is waiting for responses from other agencies that cover areas where Norfolk Southern operates.

Barninger, who did not attend the late July training, said he is in discussion with Norfolk Southern about trying to schedule a training in Columbia so more Lancaster County responders can attend.