

DHS SAVER Program

Emergency responder agencies seeking help in deciding what equipment to buy have an online resource that provides information on hundreds of products: the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) SAVER Program.

The SAVER, or System Assessment and Validation for Emergency Responders Program, began in 2004 under the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Responsibility for SAVER was transferred to the Science and Technology Directorate of DHS in January 2009, according to SAVER Program Manager John Pennella, who has been with the program since its inception.

The program's basic premise has remained the same: to provide federal, state, local and tribal emergency responders with information they can use to make knowledgeable equipment purchase decisions. The program tests and evaluates an extensive range of commercial off-the-shelf equipment that falls under DHS Authorized Equipment List categories, including:

- Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear and Explosive (CBRNE) operational and search and rescue equipment.
- Personal protective equipment.
- Physical security enhancement equipment.
- Detection.
- Information technology.
- Medical.
- Interoperable communications equipment.
- Decontamination.
- CBRNE logistical support equipment.
- Explosive device mitigation and remediation equipment.
- Inspection and screening systems.
- Intervention equipment.
- Terrorism incident prevention equipment.

In any given year, the SAVER Program evaluates between 30 and 40 products, according to Pennella. Since its inception, the program has evaluated more than 400 products and published more than 800 equipment information documents. A few examples of the myriad types of equipment for which information is available include in-car camera systems, law enforcement protective helmets, small bomb disposal robots, thermal imaging cameras, hydraulic rescue tools and facial recognition technology. In 2010, the program had 29 projects.

Evaluation Process

The agency does not have enough resources to evaluate all products, so must prioritize projects based on

SAVER AND EMERGENCY RESPONDERS

When Joe Lynch was fire chief and emergency manager for the city of Irondale, Ala., he used the SAVER Program to help decide which portable lighting units to purchase. Now retired, he serves as an instructor at the Center for Domestic Preparedness and has participated in SAVER focus groups and evaluations.

"It's like a consumer reports organization for portable public safety responder equipment," Lynch says. "It's like a pre-purchase feedback of the equipment. It makes it a more efficient and effective process."

Lynch noted that the program is also useful for administrators or program managers because it provides an added perspective that can aid in their decision process and prevent them from making a costly mistake.

"Reading what a cross-section of responders has written concerning priority features and performance can influence or change the purchaser's thoughts," Lynch says.

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current trend information and input from emergency responders.

“We work in cooperation with FEMA to determine what projects in any one year we will look at and assess,” Pennella explains. “We use information from the FEMA grant program about what the state and local folks are looking at buying. Second, we consider what responders have historically purchased and need information on, and third, whether there is a policy in place that will move the state and local folks to buy a certain type of equipment.”

“We also have a first responder group in S&T that is focused on first responder equipment and equipment development,” he adds. “We work with them to help us and we also run our own focus groups. We take all the information in together and determine the priority list.”

Depending on the type of equipment, the evaluation process takes between six to nine months.

“When we do an assessment, we get a focus group together of responders familiar with the type of equipment we are assessing,” Pennella says. “They help us understand what criteria they are interested in knowing. We ask them what they would need to know to make an informed decision if they were buying it.”

Evaluation criteria include affordability, including initial cost and cost to maintain; capability; usability; maintainability; and deployability. The focus group also provides information on scenarios the equipment will be used in, for example, a HAZMAT incident, and suggests the equipment they would like to have tested. SAVER market surveys provide information on current manufacturers of specific types of equipment.

Agency partners, called technical agents, set up and carry out the evaluations and write a variety of documents, including summaries, product lists and assessment reports.

“The technical agents are the pointy end of the stick,” Pennella explains. “We sponsor them and provide overall direction and focus and work with FEMA. The technical agents actually execute the program. They gather the responders, work with the responders to determine the criteria and scenarios, purchase the equipment, write the test plan and procedures and run the test. They facilitate the responders who are the evaluators during the process.”

SAVER Program technical agents include:

- Center for Domestic Preparedness.
- Eastern Kentucky University.
- National Urban Security Technology Laboratory, formerly Environmental Measurements Laboratory.

SAVER and Emergency Responders (continued)

“When public safety agencies make decisions, we might be making a decision on equipment we purchase only once during our career,” he explains. “It’s very costly to make a mistake on what we select for our equipment. Looking at an assessment gives us more confidence in making our purchases. Also, it vets the manufacturer’s claims. When you look at a public safety equipment catalog, manufacturers make claims and you make decisions based on those claims. If those claims are incorrect, the only option you may have is litigation, and no one wants that.”

David Williams spent 27 years with the FBI as a special agent bomb technician and as a special agent forensic explosives examiner. Now retired, he has participated in a SAVER focus group on rigging kits for moving improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and provided expert advice during the evaluation of IED disruptors.

“Projects like the SAVER Program are needed to evaluate equipment before it’s field employed,” Williams says. “None of the stuff is cheap and money is awfully hard to come by for these departments.”

“The SAVER Program appeared to be very efficient as to the actual product testing. The method of recording was very thorough.”

- Nevada National Security Site, operated by National Security Technologies, LLC, for the Department of Energy.
- Science Applications International Corporation.
- Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center Atlantic.
- Texas A&M Engineering/The Texas A&M University System.
- U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research Development and Engineering Center.

All SAVER-related documents are available through the Responder Knowledge Base website, <https://www.rkb.us/saver>. Users must be affiliated with an emergency responder organization, for example, law enforcement, fire service, EMS, emergency managers, urban search and rescue, SWAT, hazardous disposal, bomb disposal and some public works agencies, such as those involved in critical infrastructure.

Each month, approximately 2,250 publications are either downloaded or requested from the SAVER site, according to Pennella.

“Our goal is to provide knowledge products to the responder community that will help them make informed

procurement decisions,” he says. “Our focus is to provide these knowledge products that enable the responders to better select, procure, use and maintain their responder equipment. If we meet that objective, we are successful.”

For more information, visit SAVER on the Responder Knowledge Base (RKB) website at <https://www.rkb.us/saver>, e-mail SAVER@dhs.gov, or call the RKB helpline at (877) 336-2752.

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