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Warren equipment helped confirm chemical in attack

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The Detroit News

Warren -- In the seven years since the Warren Fire Department bought two hand-held chemical detectors, they've been used mainly to help residents identify chemicals in their homes.

But the Ahura FirstDefender machines were put to their most important test Friday night when federal authorities called for help analyzing the chemicals a suspected terrorist took on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 to Detroit. The department's Lt. David Frederick was working that night and responded to the call around 10:30 p.m., heading to Detroit Metropolitan Airport in Romulus.

"This is one of those things high on the magnitude list," said Lt. Dan Ross, one of the department's 20 firefighters trained to use the machine. "I think it's great we can do something to help the FBI and that the FBI knows that we have these things."

The department purchased two Ahura machines, for about \$30,000 each, from federal Homeland Security funding it received in 2002, Ross said.

Using the Ahura machine, officials were able to confirm federal authorities' initial thoughts -- that the chemical was PETN, which can be used as an explosive. The lightweight detector can quickly test chemicals on surfaces using a point-and-shoot method and also from a vial inserted in the machine. This helps prevent the machine from becoming contaminated.

A sample can be assessed within 30 seconds, giving the composition of the chemical makeup of the powder or liquid.

Ross said his department was called because he thinks it was either the closest to the airport or the closest available.

"I think it's great to be able to identify what the FBI was looking at and to have it whenever we need it," Ross said.

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