

Emergency services practice for mass casualty events

Jun 2, 2008 2:05 PM

By Aline Reynolds

East Hampton fire chief Gary Zay teamed up with the village's police captain, Mike Tracey, to organize a mass casualty drill on Sunday, June 1, simulating a mid-air plane collision that affected three areas of East Hampton Town.

The drill, offering practice in emergency operations in the event of an actual crisis, was conducted at three locations: an empty plot near East Hampton airport, the elementary school in East Hampton, and a parking lot behind a playground. East Hampton Town Councilwoman Pat Mansir, who served as a liaison to the town's emergency services for the drill, explained that it was designed in part to "get the bugs out of the communication operations" that would come into play in a real emergency.

The hypothetical emergency was based on the imaginary collision of a private jet and a small plane. According to the scenario, the jet tumbled into a field across from the airport, creating a huge fire, and the small plane plummeted into the John M. Marshall Elementary School building, sending debris flying that, in turn, caused a head-on car accident.

Rescue units were confronted with eight casualties at the airport scene, 30 more at the school, and six at the car crash site, with a number of critical injuries and fatalities. High school students volunteered to play the casualties.

Responding to the simulated emergency were the East Hampton, Bridgehampton, Sag Harbor and Amagansett fire departments and heavy rescue team; Emergency Medical Units from East Hampton, Bridgehampton, and Sag Harbor; East Hampton village and town police squad members; and East Hampton village dispatchers.

Barbara Borsack, deputy mayor of East Hampton, reported that it was the largest-scale drill she had ever witnessed. "The scope was much bigger than past ones," she said, adding that it was the first time that so many local fire, police, and EMT officials had

joined forces. Ms. Borsack said the practice was useful because “things always come up that you don’t anticipate” in emergencies and that the drill assisted in “problem solving] ahead of time for a crisis.”

A decaying recreational vehicle that officials lit on fire using kerosene and wood pellets simulated flammable plane fragments that had crashed into the field near East Hampton Airport. With flames and smoke billowing in the vicinity, that site looked like the real thing.

A series of police, firemen, emergency medical technicians and other service volunteers—who did not know what the scenarios would be and how they would unfold—rushed to each of three sites following urgent calls placed by pretend witnesses. Firemen put out the fire engulfing the recreational vehicle at the airport, and emergency medical volunteers at all three locations swiftly attended to the “injured” victims, several of whom were considered to have suffered critical trauma to the limbs, head and chest.

As Pat Mansir noted, drill or not, the adrenaline was pumping through the veins of all involved.

Ruth Dodge, a police dispatcher who has been volunteering in the Emergency Medical Care Unit for a decade, said it was challenging to have to “keep your head about you” and that her sole objective was to “concentrate on taking care of the victims” as if they were actual casualties. “Our personnel worked very well together, and the transition from the initial triage area to the ambulances was smooth,” Ms. Dodge said.

While Ms. Dodge added that the drill taught the crews how to work together as a team, EMT volunteer Ben Trowbridge asserted that it was a great way to hone the skills acquired during regular training sessions.

Fire chief Zay, along with a couple of the EMT volunteers, noted one flaw in the drill: a victim identification procedure at the elementary school was not effectively established. While some volunteer victims never showed up, others opted out at the last moment, resulting in considerable confusion in missing students and reported injuries.

Captain Tracey commented on the unforeseen need for back-up Human Services Department officials to supplement the number of crisis intervention aides.

Councilwoman Mansir thought that all the crews did an “outstanding” job in performing the mass-casualty drill. She said she was particularly impressed by the way in which the village dispatcher coordinators managed to communicate systematically with the various officials at each of the three simulated accident scenes. “One of the by-products of the drill,” Ms. Mansir added, “was to test the recent switch to an internet-run monitor system,” which had been set up only days prior to the drill.

Fifteen-year-old East Hampton high schooler Alisha Hillman, one of the DOA volunteer victims at the East Hampton Airport field scene, enjoyed the experience. "It was fun to watch the grown-ups do what they have to do to save people's lives," she said, adding that she's always wondered what it would feel like to be in an emergency situation.

Deborah Trowbridge, a junior at East Hampton High School, simulated a critically injured victim at the elementary school whose legs were paralyzed and who had internal bleeding. The highlight of the drill for Deborah was to see her brother, Ben, work in the emergency medical care unit. "It's comforting to know that if our house caught fire, he could save our lives," she said.

Chief Zay reported that, due to the success of this large-scale drill, there will certainly be another scheduled for within the next five years.

