

Northbrook hosts emergency response drill



Police officers from around the North Shore area and surrounding suburbs take part in an active shooter training scenario on Nov. 18 in Northbrook. Matt Yan/22nd Century Media



Paramedics carry a dummy representing a wounded person out of the building in a medical sling while other "injured" people walk alongside them.

- See more at: <http://www.northbrooktower.com/northbrook-hosts-emergency-response-drill#sthash.99VAUpI6.dpuf>

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Police officers in tactical gear walked across the lawn with rifles in hand. Paramedics followed behind, medical supply bags slung over their shoulders.

The men in blue headed toward the large brick building, purposeful in stride.

Earlier, a civilian with a bandaged leg had limped out of the building, assisted by another man whose white shirt was stained red.

The officers eventually came back out with a man in handcuffs.

The scene, while at first glance frightening, wasn't real. It was all part of an "active shooter" drill designed to prepare emergency personnel for a situation that has made headlines frequently in recent history.

Approximately 250 police officers, paramedics and volunteers, including more than a dozen Northbrook personnel, from 30 departments simulated the response to an active shooter Nov. 18 at Techny Towers Retreat and Conference Center.

The emergency management program was coordinated by the Cook County Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Mutual Aid Box Alarm System Division 3, the Northeastern Illinois Public Safety Training Academy and Illinois Tactical Officers Association.

A primary focus of the day was to improve the synchronization between police and paramedics when responding to gunshot situations with multiple victims.

"What it's about is shortening that wait time for every patient, speeding up our ability to move them into the EMS system," said Patrick Kreis, Winnetka's police chief.

Kreis pointed out that a building the size of Techny Towers would take hours for hundreds of officers to ensure there's no threat remaining. But injured people don't have time to wait around for the entire space to be safe before getting treated, he said.

The event just happened to take place five days after the terrorist attacks in Paris, though it had been planned far in advance. Police said it was far too early for them to take any useful tactics from the French emergency response.

Officials have, however, taken core competencies from responses to the Columbine High School and Aurora theater shootings, Northbrook Fire Department Division Chief of Training and Safety Tim Cassidy explained.

"We learned that it took too long for emergency medical help to get to those (Columbine) students," he said. "That was the way we were all taught and the way that was safest was that we had to wait until police said it was all safe. We've learned since Columbine that it doesn't work for the people involved. We need to treat them immediately.

"The idea is we work with law enforcement to get to them immediately in a safe environment."

The first response to the Boston Marathon bombing also provided a roadmap for law enforcement and EMS strategies, Kreis said.

Emergency staff with Mutual Aid Box Alarm System Division 3 fire departments — from communities as far west as Prospect Heights, as far north as Highland Park, as far east as Lake Michigan and as far south as Skokie — all trained for the last year for this culminating exercise, as did their police counterparts.

Their simultaneous response was seen in practice on Nov. 18, as a line of ambulances stood waiting to receive the wounded, and a Northbrook Fire Department vehicle sat in the parking lot as a command center for paramedics.

As injured civilians hobbled out of the building, they were directed to the command area for "treatment."

The event was heavily choreographed, according to Kreis. Once the “shooting” began, exercise coordinators released two Northbrook officers and a few Northbrook paramedics from the downstairs staging area to enter the drill zone, where a volunteer acting as a shooter followed a prerehearsed script. From there, it was up to police and paramedics how to respond.

“What the responders do once they went in the door is up to them, based on their training and their stressors and influencers that they see,” Kreis said.

As time went on, more officers were put into the mix, mirroring the reaction in a live situation. After 20 minutes had elapsed, there were more than 100 officers on the scene. Commands were relayed over handheld radios as the box alarm level — a MABAS measure of resources needed — increased to its highest classification.

In a real event, cooperating MABAS departments would fill in for local fire stations responding to a crisis, ensuring adequate emergency coverage across the board, Cassidy said.

After the suspect was captured, personnel gathered back together inside for a critical debrief to evaluate their performance. The lessons learned from this event will be incorporated into standard practices. In addition, the training model used will hopefully be rolled out throughout the state, Kreis said.

Though the sheer scope of the exercise might suggest it’s the end of the training program, area police and paramedics aren’t about to hang up their boots and call it a day.

“We’re not done,” Kreis said. “We’re never done. We’re ready, but there’s always more preparedness to do.”

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