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Emergency Drill at OVU Tests Local Agencies' Response

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VIENNA - Emergency crews from Wood County gathered Tuesday at Ohio Valley University to participate in a full-scale emergency exercise designed to critique and improve how agencies respond to emergencies.

Sponsored by the Wood County Local Emergency Planning Commission, the exercise involved agencies using normal radio channels to communicate and react to emergency scenarios acted out by volunteers at OVU's main campus.

Police and fire crews gathered at the south campus, which was designated as the staging area, until they were dispatched to the scene.

"We have volunteers who will be role-playing, and our agencies will respond to these emergency calls with real equipment," said Doug Hess, chairman of the emergency planning commission. A lot of the agencies do their own kind of training, but this is an opportunity for all the agencies to work together in very realistic scenarios."

An outside consulting firm was hired by the planning commission with state grant funds to organize and evaluate the exercise.

Jeff Harvey, with JH Consulting in Buckhannon, said his company specializes in emergency preparedness training.

"The backstory in this whole exercise is centered around a disgruntled student who will spur a variety of emergency situations," said Harvey. "We have people designated as actors, observers and evaluators. The evaluators are experienced professionals who will be judging the preparedness of the emergency crews."

Crews will be evaluated on communications, sheltering, security, tactile and hazardous material response, said Harvey.

"This is an exciting undertaking," Hess said. "Tonight, our law enforcement and fire agencies will handle a variety of situations. There might be a chemical leak, a fire or an explosion. They could be dealing with a hostage situation or a bomb. For the most part, what happens tonight will be somewhat of a surprise to emergency crews," he said.

During the first emergency drill involving a possible explosive, an actor made an emergency call to the 911 center, prefacing the call with the phrase, "This is a drill," to inform dispatchers that there was not an actual emergency.

Agencies experienced glitches in communications, resulting in delays. Real emergency situations resulting from heavy rains in Wood County resulted in many of the ambulances participating in the drill to be dispatched to other areas.

"It's an interesting scenario," said Hess. "All of these agencies should react as if this was a real-life emergency."

The American Red Cross, hospitals, the Mid-Ohio Valley Health Department, The ARC, Volunteer Action Center and Wood County Schools participated in the drill and provided volunteers. The SWAT team, sheriff's office, police and volunteer fire departments participated in the training exercise.

A second emergency exercise will take place from 5-9 p.m. Thursday at Vienna Elementary School.