

Spirit



of JEFFERSON
AND FARMER'S ADVOCATE

First Responders Hold Functional Exercise

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Spirit of Jefferson

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Law enforcement officers, fire fighters, EMS, the Red Cross, and others who would play a significant role if a disaster struck Jefferson County participated in a "functional exercise" simulating a flood and two simultaneous hazardous material leaks on Friday, April 22. The exercise bore the fitting name "Operation Troubled Waters."

The exercise was jointly staged by JH Consulting— a private disaster consulting firm based in Buckhannon— and officials from Jefferson County Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

Members of the Spirit and WHAG also participated in the exercise to simulate the role of the media in covering an ongoing disaster.

The fictitious disaster the exercise simulated was a worst-case scenario involving three separate but related disasters.

First, it envisioned the worst flooding to hit Harpers Ferry in nearly a century, with water levels rising over 30 feet.

Second, it was imagined that a deadly chlorine gas leak began simultaneously at the Harpers Ferry Water Works.

Third, it was postulated that the rising floodwaters derailed a train carrying several tanks full of strong hydrochloric acid and that the leaking acid formed a plume which moved down the river valleys.

This exercise differed from the "table top" exercise staged two weeks earlier in that it called for first responders to actually activate their communications and response infrastructure. Officials working with JH Consulting made fake phone calls from citizens who were experiencing the supposed disaster first hand in an effort to produce a life-like simulation of a nearly unimaginable disaster.

The exercise focused on four main components of Jefferson County's disaster response capability. An incident command post was set up at C.W. Shipley Elementary School charged with managing the disaster as a whole. An emergency operations center, which was charged with managing communications, was set up at the Emergency Management office. A joint information center was also set up at Emergency Management, tasked with communicating relevant information to the public and the media. Additionally, the Health Department set up a station where they simulated giving tetanus inoculations, which can be lifesavers in a flood. The exercise also emphasized the importance of getting timely, accurate information to the press. Both curtailing the spread of false rumors and disseminating the necessary information about evacuations and other safety considerations is vital in any emergency.

"It's simulated, but it's as close to real life as we can get it," said Doug Britvec, a project manager at JH Consulting and the director of Friday's exercise.

"It lets [first responders] have an opportunity to see how they would respond, areas that need improvement, as well as areas they did well in," he said.

Dave Whithers of Friendship Fire Company said that he thought the exercise had been a success.

"I think [things went] very well," he said. "I think it highlighted the fact that there's a lot of readiness in the county, that the... incident commanders and so forth are really good. We found a couple of things that need tweaking. Those will be tweaked and we'll be ready if it really happens."