

Dutchess County Hosts Nation's Largest Mass Fatality Training Exercise

Residents who have driven by the Dutchess County Emergency Response Center Campus on Creek Road in the Town of Hyde Park this week may have done a double take at the sight of massive tents, overturned vehicles and military presence. Dutchess County officials shared details about what is underway at a press conference this afternoon.

“Dutchess County is proud to host the 3rd Annual Regional Mass Fatality Management Response System Training, the largest event of its kind to take place in the nation this year,” said Dutchess County Executive Marcus J. Molinaro. More than 200 participants from across the country, representing regional, state and national, even international agencies, are on site at the Emergency Response Center taking part in facilitated discussions, didactic and field training. The event, which began on Monday, May 14th and will conclude tomorrow afternoon, is held in cooperation with Regional Catastrophic Planning Team (RCPT) of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania.

The event is designed to allow participants to apply the Regional Mass Fatality Management Response System Plan to a specific scenario. This week's scenario involves a tractor-trailer carrying jet fuel to Stewart Airport headed west on Rte 55 and 44 over the Mid Hudson Bridge. The driver loses control of the vehicle, crashes through the barrier, plummeting to the train tracks below, landing directly on northbound Amtrak train, exploding and completely destroys two cars of the train. No survivors have been found in the damaged cars and it is estimated that each train car was near capacity of 130 passengers. The train was scheduled to make stops at Poughkeepsie, then north through Albany to Quebec, Canada. There is no passenger manifest.

Based on this scenario, there would be a multitude of agencies involved in the investigation and management of the event. A sampling of participating agencies for this week's event include the Quebec Public

Safety Ministry, Air National Guard, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), 49th Quartermaster Group, Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT), various law enforcement agencies including FBI, MTA Police, local police agencies, NJ Division. Numerous other agencies from across the country including Los Angeles, CA; Clark County, NV; are also present to observe and help develop similar plans in their regions.

This training event focuses on the aftermath of a mass fatality event – the documentation, recovery, investigation, storage and processing victims for the purpose of accurately identifying the deceased and returning them to their families, when possible.

One of the most important parts of the training for participating leaders is the importance of “Managing Expectations”. The County’s Medical Examiner is thrust into the spotlight and often the public has little understanding of how the medical examiner process actually works. Given the scenario outlined above, the process for identifying victims would take weeks or likely months and it is critical for people to understand how the process works so that unrealistic expectations are not created. According to Frank DePaolo, Regional Mass Fatality Management Project Lead, “In the event of a mass casualty, medical examiners do not have the capacity to do this alone. The regional system is the solution to get the job done when disaster strikes, but it is critical for everyone involved, from elected officials to the general public, to understand that it is a long, involved and difficult process. It is the most difficult thing a Medical Examiner will ever have to deal with.”

Dutchess County Medical Examiner Kari Reiber said, “If an event of this magnitude were to occur here in Dutchess, our office would be quickly overwhelmed. That is why this training event and our continuing partnership with the RCPT is so important. There is only one chance to get it right, with no room for errors, so you must be able to depend on partners for help to be able to deal with all of the challenges. “

Over the course of the event, a range of mass fatality management operations are being covered including: logistics and movement of assets; establishment of the Fatality Management Branch within the ICS Structure; fatality search and recovery; incorporation of incoming assets from state, regional and federal partners; set up and operation of the disaster morgue and activation of a Family Assistance Center. The goal is build processes and protocols that are similar so in the event of emergency, various agencies can come into a region and be able to assist quickly and

effectively in a coordinate effort.

Planning for this event has been months in the making and has involved extensive coordination between the Dutchess County Emergency Management Office and the Medical Examiner's Office with the RCPT. According to Dutchess County Emergency Response Coordinator Dana Smith, "This has been a significant undertaking, coordinating with numerous agencies and arranging the logistics of millions of dollars in equipment of set-up. That Dutchess County was chosen as the host county for this event is a testament to the great work of Dr. Reiber and our Emergency Manager Ken Davidson and our entire county team as well as the commitment to excellence that has been set by County Executive Molinaro."

County Executive Molinaro concluded, "This training event is so valuable on many levels. Several local officials have joined us for this event to take advantage of this learning opportunity. We appreciate the effort and the work being done by all those participating in this week's event. These participants face many challenges including dwindling resources, increased needs and often a public that does not always understand the full scope of their work. We are honored to host these agencies and hope this event offers the public an understanding of how much goes into these preparedness efforts."

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