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News

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Preparing for the worst
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By Nate Traylor
Leader Staff



Polson ambulance crew members Keena Campbell, front, and Sandra Debruin, take a patient through the hallways, escorted by SRT member and Tribal officer Capt. Louis Fiddler. Zach Urness/Leader

St. Joseph employees rehearse hostage scenario
POLSON — Scenario: A gun-wielding maniac takes hospital employees hostage and shoots five before threatening to turn the gun on himself.

What do you do?
Last Thursday St. Joseph Medical Center personnel had to react accordingly when a disgruntled employee stormed the halls with a gun and took hostages on the second floor. The employee wasn't really disgruntled and his gun was fake, but the scenario gave hospital employees and the county's Special Response Team valuable training in how to handle the situation should it arise in real life.

Karen Lund, St. Joseph's Director of Patient Care Services, spent three weeks planning the scenario and sprung the faux-hostage situation on hospital employees with no prior notice.

"What we want to do is catch people off guard, but use it as an education piece," said Lund.

Lund and Steve Stanley of the Office of Emergency Management performed a Hazard Vulnerability Study to determine the likelihood and severity of that particular crises. A hostage situation is one of the situations county emergency crews, including the SRT, have dealt with before, and they train to keep their skills honed.

"In today's society, it is very probable," said Lund of a hostage crisis.

The fact that the drill was performed in the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings was only a coincidence, albeit an eerie one. But if that tragedy taught us anything, it's that terror can strike anywhere, Lund said.

"A lot of people thought we were doing this because of the shootings in Virginia, but we actually had this planned for three weeks," said Lund.

St. Joseph Medical Center is an accredited hospital, and as such, personnel are required to run emergency drills twice a year. However, this was the first time employees were faced with a hostage situation.

The hostages were informed ahead of time that they were going to be threatened at gunpoint by Dennis Corbitt, who does tech support for the hospital. However everyone else — including the patients — were kept in the dark. As soon as employees saw Corbitt shouting with his phony fire arm, Lund was there to announce the drill.

"Some of them were surprised saying 'What's going on?'" she said. "And I said 'If this was real what would you do?'"

Emergency responders, including Tribal, county and city police and Polson Ambulance Service responded to the scene knowing it was a drill, but acted as though it were the real deal.

Sheriff's Lt. Mike Sargeant said it was a good opportunity for the Special Response Team to work through a hostage situation and it is something they'll continue to rehearse.

Sargeant acted as the SRT commander and negotiator. However, in reality he would have acted solely as the negotiator while undersheriff Jay Doyle would have headed the SRT.

Still, it was good experience.

"It was positive in the way that we got the team out doing scenario-based training," he said.

He cited good interaction between all emergency responders. This type of situation typically involves multiple agencies, several of which were at the scene last week.

When Corbitt took Home Health employees hostage on the second floor, one of the employees faked a heart attack before Corbitt pretended to open fire on five others. He then pretended to take his own life.

To add to the realism, victims were dabbed with fake blood and raced to the ER where medical professionals treated them as though they were seriously injured.

"Once it was all done, we debriefed and asked what went well, what do we need to improve on and what did we learn," said Lund.

In Lund's 10 years coordinating drills, she said this was the most realistic one she has seen.

Practice Manager Heidi Webber noted how well employees acted under pressure. While they all knew to expect a drill, no one when it was going to happen.

"I thought people did very well because there is no preparation ahead of time. You just call it and away you go," she said.

Hospital personnel isolated the gunman on the second floor and kept others out of the line of fire just like the were supposed to.

"It was important for them to understand that this really can happen," Webber said.

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