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## This is only a drill

### Mock airplane disaster tests local responders

May 2, 2012

Messenger News

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By BILL SHEA

Messenger staff writer

Clouds of smoke swirled around a shattered hulk near the end of a runway at Fort Dodge Regional Airport Wednesday morning. Moaning, bloodied figures lay sprawled in and around the wreckage.

The wail of sirens split the air as emergency vehicles raced to the scene. Within minutes, firefighters and paramedics swarmed around the crash victims, while police officers cordoned off the area. Across town, the emergency room staff at Trinity Regional Medical Center prepared for an influx of badly injured patients.

The situation that unfolded over about two hours had all the characteristics of a disaster, with one important difference. None of it was real.

The wreckage littering the runway was an old school bus, minus its wheels and engine, that was standing in for an airplane. The bloodied victims were volunteers wearing makeup and plastic simulated injuries.

All of that was part of a disaster drill designed to test the ability of local emergency services to respond to a plane crash at the airport.

"It's not about having a successful drill," said Rhonda Chambers, the airport's director of aviation. "It's about what did we learn. You want to find out what your weaknesses are."

She called the event "a very beneficial learning drill."

The drill's scenario revolved around a Great Lakes Airlines plane taking off when one of its engines exploded, according to Chambers. She said the scenario included the plane crashing down onto the runway, skidding and bursting into flames.

After the volunteer victims were in place and members of the Iowa Air National Guard lit some smoke bombs, airport and emergency personnel reacted as if it was a real crash.

First on the scene was Kevin Ferrell, an airport maintenance worker and firefighter at the wheel of the airport's large fire truck. He was by himself for three minutes, spraying water from remote control nozzles on the front of the truck. Chambers said the airport workers would arrive first at any crash and would work by themselves for at least three minutes before help from outside agencies arrived. She said extinguishing fires would be their role in those initial minutes.

Fort Dodge firefighters arrived next. They were followed by Trinity

Fort Dodge, IA



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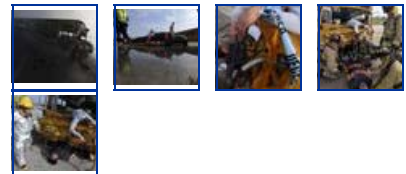
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Regional Medical Center paramedics Andy Lake and Jim Vinsand, who began assessing all the simulated victims.

At about 9 a.m., the drill was put on hold when firefighters and paramedics had to respond to a pair of real medical emergency calls that were received at nearly the same time. The drill later resumed and concluded at about 9:45 a.m.

The drill scenario placed some people into new leadership roles. For example, Chambers merely observed the exercise, forcing her administrative assistant, Melissa Bock, to do the things she would ordinarily do in a crisis. Police Lt. Dennis Mernka and Fire Department Lt. Jeff Hill led their department's responses.

Following the drill, representatives of every agency gathered in the airport terminal conference room to critique their performance.

"Everybody got to see everybody's input," Hill said. "It was just a really good time to network with all the agencies."

The drill provided a good opportunity for various agencies to work together, according to Police Chief Tim Carmody.

"I think it was a great opportunity for everybody to understand the multiple disciplines that would respond to a disaster," he said. "I was impressed with the partnerships."

Agencies that participated in the drill included the 133rd Test Squadron of the Iowa Air National Guard, the Community Emergency Response Team, Civil Air Patrol, Clare Rescue Squad, Badger Fire Department, Dodger Area Rapid Transit, the Fort Dodge police and fire departments, Fort Dodge Regional Airport, Great Lakes Airlines, Humboldt County Emergency Management Agency, Iowa State Patrol, Otho Fire Department, The Salvation Army, Transportation Security Administration, Trinity Regional Medical Center, the Webster County Emergency Management Agency, and the Webster County Sheriff's Department.

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