Press Release

Release Nr:  2307-08

July 26, 2023

Fort Drum Public Affairs

Fort Drum agencies test emergency readiness capabilities during full-scale exercise

FORT DRUM, N.Y.  -- Dozens of Fort Drum and local agencies kicked into emergency response mode July 26 during a full-scale exercise on post.

“We conduct these exercises every year because we want to make sure we are prepared for any sort of emergency or disaster that comes our way,” said Rich Hughes, Fort Drum emergency manager. “We base the exercises not necessarily on the most likely or dangerous scenarios but the things that would stress our resources and response capabilities.”

Dozens of Soldiers and civilians participated as role players, acting as casualties and bystanders with information to share with first responders.

Hughes said the mass casualty scenario required installation police, and fire personnel to establish a command post near the incident site, where they could coordinate their response with mutual aid partners.

This included River Hospital, Carthage Area Hospital, Samaritan Medical Center, state and local police and multiple ambulance companies.

“We always want to make sure our response techniques are tested, and how we integrate all the organizations involved as seamlessly as possible,” Hughes said. “By testing our joint response procedures, we can make sure everybody understands how they can work together.”

Hughes said that the benefit of having a mutually supporting environment in the North Country, where Fort Drum is heavily integrated with its neighboring communities, is immeasurable when it comes to emergency preparedness.

“It’s a really unique partnership, because whether we are supporting them or they are supporting us, ultimately we are always going to support each other,” he said.

One ambulance team loaded Pvt. Akean McLane, with 2nd Assault Helicopter Battalion, 10th Aviation Regiment, 10th Combat Aviation Brigade onto a gurney after determining he suffered a spinal injury and broken legs. Out of character, McLane said the situation called for him to panic and jump out of a two-story window. In real life, though, he said he would react differently.

“After hearing the shooting, I would take cover,” he said. “If I had a weapon, I would try to take out the shooter if he tried to enter the room. I don’t think I would jump.”

In times of crisis, the Soldier and Family Readiness Division consolidates critical support services in one location for Soldiers, family members and civilian employees in need. Lynn Williams runs SFRD’s Mobilization and Deployment program and is also responsible for standing up the Emergency Family Assistance Center (EFAC) at the Family Resource Center.

“The function of the EFAC is one-stop shop for Soldiers and families during an emergency event,” she said. “When activated by the garrison commander, the EFAC serves as a central point for providing factual information, and it can also provide immediate crisis intervention, information, and referral assistance.”

Upon entering the EFAC, individuals complete a client intake form that allows the staff to assess their needs, whether it is with a financial specialist, a lawyer from the Office of the Staff Judge Advocate, a chaplain, or military and family life counselor. Williams said the EFAC can go into 24-hour operations depending on the emergency, so it is imperative that new SFRD staff members are trained on how an EFAC operates.

“The best way to test any system is through exercise,” Williams said. “This exercise allows agencies to find and rectify potential downfalls and take corrective actions, so if or when we operate under a real emergency, we know we are going in prepared.”

Maj. Samantha Pelcak, Department of Behavioral Health deputy chief, was at the incident site and EFAC with a team of behavioral health specialists.

“We serve as the disaster mental health response team, and our goal is to provide support during an emergency,” she said. “It’s not going to be long-term therapy, but what we call psychological first aid. We talk with people to find out what kind of help they need and get them engaged with the coping skills to handle the situation at hand.”

At the incident scene, Pelcak said they communicate with the incident commander to identify victims who are significantly distressed and need immediate attention.

“We can check in with them and help deescalate the situation,” she said. “And then, our strongest response is at the EFAC, where we can be helpful on the triage aspect from a behavioral health standpoint.”

Pelcak said their support is not limited to the victims of a mass casualty incident, but also includes the first responders who sort through the chaos and confusion of traumatic event.

“To neglect that side of the house would be a disservice because they are an important part of the team,” she said. “In the moment, our goal is to not get in their way and let them do what they have to do. But after the fact, I think it is important we support and check in with the first responders and see how they are doing.”

Pelcak said that behavioral health specialists frequently support Soldiers dealing with traumatic events, but it is rare for them to train with military and civilian agencies during full-scale exercises.

“We have the courses and ability to learn what it looks like on paper, but to participate in this exercise, practice those skills, and see what we can learn and improve on, is really just a fantastic opportunity,” she said.

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Video from the event can be found here: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1b\_BLL8MjzacD\_Ybjkf3k80\_RX61Ms9UU?usp=sharing](https://usg01.safelinks.protection.office365.us/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fdrive.google.com%2Fdrive%2Ffolders%2F1b_BLL8MjzacD_Ybjkf3k80_RX61Ms9UU%3Fusp%3Dsharing&data=05%7C01%7Clisa.r.albrecht.civ%40army.mil%7C9b03a524f8a14385570708db8e16699b%7Cfae6d70f954b481192b60530d6f84c43%7C0%7C0%7C638259999123350572%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=0UwyVvAm%2Bh4%2BeYcz%2BgRUMghwX8W%2BhAMh6gWTVfcWU9g%3D&reserved=0)

Photo Captions:

FSE1/2 - First responders from Fort Drum and local communities participate in a full-scale exercise July 26 on post to test their emergency readiness skills. (Photo by Mike Strasser)

FSE3 - First Lt. Matthew Bacca, a behavioral health specialist, assists a community member at the Emergency Family Assistance Center during the full-scale exercise July 26. (Photo by Mike Strasser, fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

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