Press Release

Release No: 2407-02

July 11, 2024

Fort Drum Public Affairs

Fort Drum tests emergency response capabilities during readiness exercise

FORT DRUM, N.Y.  -- If a train car derailed near Fort Drum, releasing a potentially toxic plume that drifted across the installation, how would installation personnel respond and what decisions would be made to keep the community safe?

Those questions – and many other “what ifs” – were addressed during a daylong readiness exercise July 10 on post.

“We primarily conduct an exercise every year to test and refine our emergency response and recovery capabilities,” said Rich Hughes, Fort Drum emergency manager. “It requires a massive coordination and communication effort to keep everyone apprised of the situation in real time and reacting to developments throughout the exercise.”

The full-scale exercise involved dozens of installation agencies and organizations working to resolve the crisis, starting with teams of first responders at the incident site to secure and investigate the crash area, treat casualties, and coordinate efforts from the incident command post.

Glenn Follett, Fort Drum emergency medical technician, had just responded to a real-world call at Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield before serving as the triage officer at the incident post.

“We just cleared Samaritan (Medical Center) and went straight here,” he said. “Going from a real medical emergency to a training exercise, it’s almost all the same for us. We do this all the time.”

Follett said it also gives them more practice using a new health care communication platform that connects medical teams for faster patient updates.

Also participating in the exercise were mutual aid partners from Gouverneur Rescue Squad, Evans Mills Volunteer Ambulance, and South Jefferson Rescue Squad, who assisted with medical aid and transport to local hospitals in Watertown, Gouverneur, Alexandria Bay, and Carthage.

“Fort Drum is a great partner to Jefferson County, and we share resources with them when they need it, just as they share resources with us,” said Niel Rivenburgh, Jefferson County Fire and Emergency Services deputy director. “Being engaged with Fort Drum in an exercise like this gives us an opportunity to be ahead of the threat wherever it may occur.”

Hughes said there were hundreds of injects within the exercise to advance the narrative, making it crucial for key personnel to process new information and make timely and life-saving decisions.

“We have a white cell where people are making a lot of calls to the incident command post, the emergency family assistance center or EOC (emergency operations center), and they inject things into the exercise,” Hughes said. “It could be things like eyewitness reports or people asking for help or requesting information.”

Hughes said that roughly 80 Soldiers and civilians volunteered as role players for the exercise, serving as casualties and community members in distress.

Before entering the Family Resource Center, which served as the emergency family assistance center (EFAC), role players were provided background information about their characters. Some were panicked and needed behavioral health assistance, while others lived in housing near the incident site and required temporary lodging.

“The EFAC serves as a one-stop center for Soldiers and family members to get information and resources they need following a crisis,” said Lynn Williams, EFAC coordinator. “The EFAC is activated by the garrison commander, and then we have representatives from multiple agencies come in to provide assistance.”

This includes behavioral health specialists, military and family life counselors, American Red Cross and housing representatives.

“It’s a long list of people involved because we want to cover everything in an emergency situation,” Williams said. “In a real-world situation, the EFAC could be operational 24 hours a day and can last days or months until the crisis is resolved. It’s about being as flexible and supportive as possible to meet the needs of our Soldiers and families.”

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Photo Captions:

FSE1 - Personnel from Fort Drum’s emergency and medical services test their emergency response capabilities to an incident July 10, while representatives from dozens of agencies and organizations across post provide support during the widescale emergency readiness exercise. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

FSE2 - Personnel from Fort Drum’s emergency and medical services test their emergency response capabilities to an incident July 10, while representatives from dozens of agencies and organizations across post provide support during the widescale emergency readiness exercise. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

FSE3 - Spc. Melissa Perez, a behavioral health technician, talks with a family member at the Family Resource Center when the emergency family assistance center was activated during the widescale exercise July 10 at Fort Drum. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)