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Volunteers setting up the cots
Photo courtesy of: Kevin Morley, Public Information Officer
Barnstable County Incident Management Team

71 Red Cross Volunteers Participate in First Regional Sheltering Simulation in Yarmouth

July 1, Hyannis, MA - Some 71 Red Cross Disaster Action Team Members with the Cape Cod and Islands Chapter, American Red Cross, participated in the first Regional Sheltering Simulation in Yarmouth.

This exercise was held at the Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School, one of six regional shelters identified by the Barnstable County Emergency Management Team. This was also the first time that multiple agencies collaborated to offer a regional full-service shelter including a special area to shelter pets. The simulation lasted seven hours.

The Red Cross volunteers managed the registration of volunteers and members of the public, who played the role of 'disaster affected-clients'. They organized the shelter for people, set up dormitories, fed some 250 people for lunch and offered a health services and mental health component for the day.

The overall goal of the exercise was to test the ability to provide for the safety of the public and responders in a time of emergency, test the functionality of the elements of a regional full-service shelter and introduce the regional sheltering concept to the public and to agency officials. The simulation's goals were to demonstrate an integrated, well-resourced system for sheltering residents and visitors during emergencies and illustrate the benefits of regionalization, whereby the activities of multiple safety agencies are coordinated for optimal efficiency, timely response and a high level of public safety.

This regional shelter simulation was the first ever held in the state of Massachusetts and several emergency officials from off-Cape as well as other Red Cross chapters attended. Some key elements practiced during the 'drill' were communications between the regional shelter and the Multi-agency Coordinating Center (MACC); exercise the communications between the county and MEMA Region 2 and test evacuation procedures using regional transportation assets. An after-action review to evaluate this exercise and the development of a regional sheltering plan and future exercises are being planned and will occur within the next three weeks.

The Cape Cod and Islands Chapter, American Red Cross organized the actual sheltering and operations, which includes formally operating the shelter, and providing mass care and feeding. In total including other response agencies over 150 volunteers and other staff were on hand during this day.

A key element of the full-service shelter includes being able to provide shelter for pets, organized by the Cape Cod Disaster Animal Response Team (CCDART). What the various agencies experienced in past emergencies is that some residents have been reluctant to leave for shelters because they don't want to leave their pets. Currently three out of the six regional shelters can accommodate pets but the plan calls for all six shelters to have this capability.

Other agencies participating were: Coordination/Planning: Barnstable County Regional Emergency Planning Committee (BCREPC). The Incident Management Team (IMT), which is responsible for the planning and command over the exercise, drawn from members of the BCREPC and responsible for managing the regional sheltering plan. Also on hand were: Public Safety officials (Yarmouth Fire and Police, Dennis Fire and Police), Cape Cod Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), working under the Yarmouth Fire Department and the Barnstable County Sheriff's Department and staffing a variety of positions for multiple organizations at the exercise. Assistance for the disabled was organized by Cape Organization for Rights of the Disabled (CORD) - assisting those with special needs in the sheltering process. Finally, staff from the Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School was available for help with setting up and breaking down of the simulation and storing the materials used.

Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) supported communications, organizing communications within the shelter as well as to the outside world should cell phones and other phones are out of commission. Transportation was provided by First Student Bus, which picked up people in Dennis and Yarmouth to play as disaster-affected clients. Negotiations are also underway with the Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority to ensure full coverage.

During past national and regional disasters, the Red Cross, BCREPC and other agencies learned that it is easier to manage full-service regional shelters rather than multiple small shelters for small numbers of people—to make the most efficient use of human and material resources. These six regional shelters can currently handle 3,000 people, or 500 per shelter. When fully resourced, the combined capacity will be 6,000, or 1,000 per shelter. Through the Cape Cod Traffic Plan, the Mass Military Reservation (MMR) can shelter an additional 3,000 people.

Regional shelters allow for Enough food, water, supplies and supporting resources to provide quality care to all potential users of the shelters. They allow for the sheltering of pets and transportation is available for those in need. In addition volunteer medical personnel will be available to address basic, general and special medical needs at the site. Finally, there will be coordinated safety, logistics and communications through local police and fire departments, ARES, other local and regional safety agencies working together to support the sheltering operations, ensure the public's safety, and facilitate essential communications.

The regional sheltering plan is designed to complement local, town management of emergency resources. Local and community shelters can open at any time. In an emergency, each town's Emergency Management Director makes decisions independently on deploying emergency resources, in coordination with regional authorities.

As part of the mass feeding exercise, lunch was provided thanks to funding by the American Red Cross, Cape Cod and Islands Chapter and served thanks to a special Breakaway grille truck. Leftovers were donated to the Noah Shelter in Hyannis.

The Cape Cod and Islands Chapter will initiate a Disaster Response Capacity Plan on both Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket during the next fiscal year. The goal will be to increase shelter capacity, recruit and train additional Response volunteers and to collaborate with local government and other response agencies to implement a major shelter location on each islands should a disaster occur.

All American Red Cross disaster assistance is free, made possible by voluntary donations of time and money from the American people. You can help disaster-affected clients on Cape Cod and the Islands by making a financial gift to the American Red Cross Local Disaster Relief Fund, which enables the Red Cross to provide shelter, food, counseling and other assistance to those affected by a disaster. On those rare occasions when donations exceed Red Cross expenses for a specific disaster, contributions are used to prepare for and serve those affected by other disasters. Contributions to the Local Disaster Relief Fund may be sent to your local American Red Cross chapter at 286 South Street, Hyannis, MA 02601. Tel. (508) 775-1540. Internet users can make a secure online contribution by visiting capecodandislandsredcross.org

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