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## NSU Public Safety Praises Response to Disaster Drill

After four-plus hours, the large-scale emergency exercise staged Tuesday, Nov. 9 on the campus of Northeastern State University gave more than a dozen response agencies a chance to measure their performance in a crisis situation.

Numerous agencies participated with the NSU Department of Public Safety and Campus Police, including Tahlequah Fire Department, Tahlequah City Hospital, TCH and Cherokee Nation EMS, W.W. Hastings Indian Medical Center, EagleMed, Cherokee County 911, Tahlequah Public Works Authority, Cherokee County Emergency Management, Cherokee Nation Emergency Management, Oklahoma Highway Patrol, U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Red Cross, Tahlequah Police Department and Cherokee Nation Marshal Service.

A number of strengths and weaknesses were identified during the exercise, said NSU campus police Capt. James Bell, director of the drill.

"Overall, the exercise went really well," he said. "There was excellent communication between our officers on dispatch and out in the field. We also did well passing information to incident command. Our biggest problem was inter-agency communication, so that's something we'll address in our final after-action report."

The exercise, conducted under guidelines from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, utilized the Incident Command System structure, a nationwide emergency response framework. The drill tested the ability of multiple agencies to respond in concert.

The exercise attracted the participation of so many agencies because it included an array of exigences which, in a real situation, would require their response.

"The other agencies were all very enthusiastic," Bell said. "NSU had to do a multi-agency drill, so we asked them what they needed to assess themselves, and that's how we developed the scenario. It gave everybody some sort of certification, compliance or credit."

Patti Buhl, NSU's director of public safety, served as incident commander. She commended the internal performance of NSU public safety personnel, but said communications between agencies could be enhanced.

"I was pleased with the job our officers did as far as communicating with our dispatch and incident command," she said. "I'm also pleased with the reports I'm seeing of how well the agencies worked together. But I think collectively everyone involved believed inter-agency communication needed to be improved."

Communication issues aside, Bell said other Cherokee County and Tahlequah agencies involved handled their roles admirably, though he noted that ultimately they will grade themselves.

"The Tahlequah Fire Department really impressed me with how well they did," he said. "Obviously they've done these kinds of drills before, along with the real incidents they handle. They really had their act together."

Bell also praised the inter-agency Special Operations Team, which includes SWAT-trained personnel from Cherokee Nation Marshall Service, Tahlequah Police Department and Cherokee County Sheriff's Office.

"During the drill there was a report of another shooter in North Leoser after the team was set up on a barricaded suspect," Bell said. "This came in as a rumor, but they split the team and took care of two situations at once."

The campus police leadership offered the most praise to NSU's new Campus Community Emergency Response Team, which

received its training from the Department of Homeland Security in August. Members include residence hall managers, resident assistants and parking officers.

"There were unattended victims in the building due to lack of manpower or responders waiting for decontamination," Bell said. "The CCERT members were able to get into the building and almost overwhelm the ambulances with evacuees."

Bell said the team was such an enhancement of manpower that other agencies sought its assistance, and a purpose of CCERT is to serve off-campus in Tahlequah and Cherokee County.

"They self-dispatched, carried out tasks assigned them by emergency responders, and did exactly what they were trained to do," Bell said. "The police and fire were asking for CCERT as an additional asset. The CCERT students enjoyed it and there are now others interested in participating."

For NSU, the primary purpose of the drill was to meet the recommendations of Gov. Brad Henry's Campus Life and Safety and Security Task Force, but Buhl said other exercises will follow.

"This is just the first of many drills on all three campuses," she said. "They won't all be this large, but at times they will. We want people to know that we will keep testing continuously to improve."

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