

Health Headlines

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(JJP Decontamination team members in action with our new fixed-base "Decon" Trailer)

James J. Peters VA Medical Center Emergency Management Preparations

In the days following September 11, 2001, Emergency Management personnel, the world over, knew their work would change dramatically. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, the unthinkable had become reality. In New York, first responders, medical personnel and the general public converged on "Ground Zero" to rescue, to console and to work on the initial phases of a massive cleanup. And we came together to mourn our losses.

The James J. Peters (JJP) VA Medical Center had an up-close look at the disaster, and many of our staff were dispatched to assist in providing medical care, counseling to survivors, and for other important functions. “That was a day none of us will ever forget,” stated JJP Director, MaryAnn Musumeci. “I think we knew at the moment of the second impact, that life would be forever changed. Our world will never feel quite as safe, as it did the day before 9/11.”

In response to the new world realities, Emergency Management staff of the JJP and other VA’s began to re-assess threat levels and preparations. While emergency drills and training had long been a vital function in VA Medical Centers, reassessments included new processes, larger budgets and updated equipment. Emergency Management Operations Plans were re-tooled and unit preparations were reviewed in painstaking detail. The training tempo has also increased dramatically and three volunteer teams were developed using JJP staff, forming the Hospital Decontamination, DEMPS (Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System) and Patient Reception Teams.

At the JJP, Emergency Management Specialist, Robbin Marra, inherited a robust Emergency Management Program, but took it up several notches from there. “There are no second chances in this business,” stated Ms. Marra. “It’s been said before, but we have to have it right all the time, the bad guys only have to get it right once. For that reason, we must maintain a constant state of readiness.”

Recently, the JJP Emergency Management staff engaged in two very successful training drills. The first of which was a 3-Day FEMA accredited Decontamination Drill, held April 6-8, 2010. The second was a joint VA and DOD National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) exercise held at Stewart Air National Guard base.

The scenario for the April training featured a mock “dirty bomb” explosion at a Major League Baseball game here in New York. Twenty one of our “Decon Team” members participated in

this full-scale event, which included the deployment of our Decontamination Trailer and the activation of the Decon Incident Management Team. The Decon Team donned their Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and performed the decontamination of victims of the mock terrorist attack.

The May 1st event, dubbed Operation Golden Eagle 2, provided some members of the JJP Decon Team and the Patient Reception Team, an opportunity to participate in a multi agency VA DoD/NDMS exercise. This exercise enabled its participants to practice the VA DoD/NDMS Plan, which can be activated to receive and process both civilian and military patients during a federally declared disaster. In this scenario, JJP was the Secondary Support Center (SSC) to the Hudson Valley Health Care System (HVHCS) serving as the Federal Coordinating Center (FCC). In that capacity, our medical center provides a Patient Reception Team (PRT) to meet and process patients at a designated area, such as an Airport or an emergency shelter. The PRT consists of staff from various clinical fields, as well as administrative and motor pool staff.

Decon Team members are very dedicated individuals who serve on a voluntary basis. They must pass a special medical clearance exam in order to “don and doff” special Level C Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) They are required to attend over 40 hours of special training and they must also participate in monthly decon drills and training.

“We are grateful to our Decon and Emergency Management personnel for the dedication they have shown to the safety of our patients and staff.” stated Musumeci. “These people are volunteers and they take on these duties in addition to their regular responsibilities. They are to be commended for their efforts.”

For more information related to this story or the James J. Peters VA Medical Center, please contact Jim Connell, Public Affairs Officer, at 718.584.9000, Ext. 6620.

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