

'Earthquake' tests emergency response

Demolition of Mount Pleasant Academy provides realistic setting for drill

By Lucia Walinchus
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MOUNT PLEASANT — Police officers and firefighters swarmed the old Mount Pleasant Academy on Wednesday, responding to an "earthquake" that left the school in a jumbled mess of twisted metal, exposed wires and crumbs of brick.

The town seized the opportunity to hold an earthquake drill, ripping apart the school that was scheduled to be torn down anyway.

"I think we've been very good about getting experience with hurricanes and those types of disasters, but this is a real unique opportunity for us, because of the demolition of the school, to come out here and just be better prepared," said Harry Sewell, acting police chief.

On a humid day with the mercury inching above 90 degrees, emergency workers scrambled to help injured patients, clear the scene and build support structures so the walls wouldn't collapse when they entered.

Every level of rescue worker got in on the action, from citizen response teams, which made the initial medical assessments, to the S.C. Emergency Response Task Force, which helped with logistics at a little tent labeled "command post." Even town employees volunteered to act as distraught parents, screaming and fighting their way toward the rubble.

Statewide drill

Charleston County is participating in the annual statewide emergency preparedness drill this week. The county's Emergency Operations Center has been fully activated to operate as though a major earthquake hit the Summerville area. The drill, which began Wednesday and wraps up today, is aimed at making sure the county's emergency authorities are prepared for potential disasters.

Demolition crews put six mannequins in the building before collapsing much of the roof and taking out most of the front wall with a back hoe.

Firefighters worked for two and a half hours to build a wooden frame spanning about 50 feet to stabilize the wall. Then they drilled holes in the brick and blasted through with a sledgehammer.

"OK, you just died," Steven Drozd said half-jokingly as a firefighter tried to take a look around the rubble. Drozd, the technical rescue coordinator, oversaw the operation and coached rescue workers on building supports to reinforce each doorway and each tattered roof before proceeding.

It was grueling work, but by constantly switching three-person teams on a rotating 15-minute shift, firefighters slowly made their way to the mannequins.

Since the town has only three ambulances, emergency crews played out a scenario in which both the Ravenel and Don Holt bridges were damaged and that help would be a long time coming.

That creative thinking is critical, said Michael Shirey of the S.C. Area Health Education Consortium, which trained firefighters for this type of catastrophic situation.

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