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Disaster drill showcases city's preparedness

By Michelle Fisher, Special to the News
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If an actual magnitude 7.8 earthquake had struck the Peninsula on Oct. 21, as opposed to the Great California Shakeout, the city of Rancho Palos Verdes would have been ready. City officials and staff were better prepared to assist residents because of new technology connecting them with first responders such as police, fire and emergency services.

Drill coordinator Lonna Calhoun attributed the success of the disaster drill to the commitment shown by city staff, as well as the new Incident Management System software created by Palos Verdes on the NET.

"During the drill, we activated a Level III emergency event in the city's emergency operation center with about 15 staff members at several workstations. We really tested their ability to understand what the situation was during a disaster, realize their priorities and use the available resources," said Calhoun, who designed the exercise. "Part of the drill was to test the IMS system that PVNET developed and also the GIS (geographical information systems)."

When communication lines are down, Calhoun explained, amateur radio operators remain one of the "most reliable means of communication," as they transmit messages via a radio antenna to the Lomita Sheriff's Station and other local EOCs.

"This IMS enables messages to come directly to the city's EOC and then allows staff to input and document other messages coming in from a multitude of sources. It maintains a minute-by-minute record documenting what is happening," said Calhoun. "This was really an excellent drill."

Volunteers pull together

Dennis McLean, RPV's director of finance and information technology, agreed that the city's first disaster drill with the IMS technology was a great success.

"The drill gave us the chance to test out two changes we've made to the EOC: our ability to communicate much more effectively with the [Peninsula Volunteer Action Network] and DCS — both organizations that work together in the emergency communication center adjacent to City Hall — and the information technology equipment, which includes rollout wireless PCs and phones operating over our network," he said. "Assuming all power is lost, the city's emergency generator would start up and should enable the entire IT system to work in the EOC."

PVNET Director Ted Vegvari said his computer center began developing the IMS software three years ago, working closely with the Office of Disaster Management. In all, about 20 PVNET interns contributed to the process.

"We worked with staff, attended meetings and made changes so it would work exactly as the city needed it to," Vegvari said. "There is no other emergency system out there that is operational and this simple and easy to use. In the EOC, they can see at a glance what is priority number one, what is number two and who has been notified because this information is displayed on a large GIS screen."

Added McLean, "When we're able to view incidents reported on a GIS map, it provides us the visual ability to much more quickly establish the priorities or, if incidents are grouped together, possibly even the severity."

Most important, McLean said, is that the IMS enables them to track the progress that city staff has made for each reported incident and every action step taken before completion.

"This was our first test of working together with the [ham radio] volunteers," he continued, "whereby what they reported was entered into the IMS, and then those of us who worked the drill acted on those incident reports to

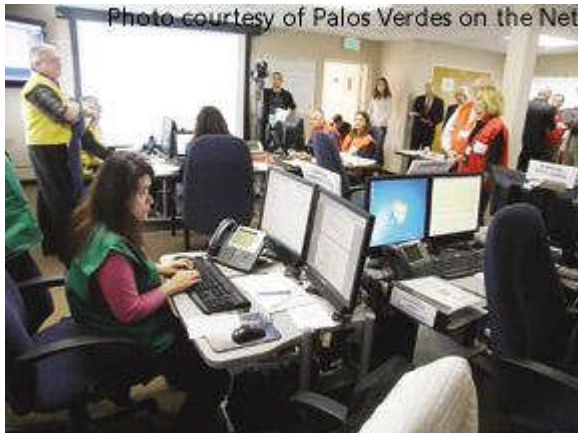
establish our priorities and action plan.”

“Communication is No. 1 during a disaster. If you don’t know there’s a problem, you can’t address it,” Vegvari said, expressing his appreciation for the ham radio operators. “When everything goes down, those radios are a lifeline to the world.”

Calhoun, who has been a consultant in the South Bay since 2003, noted that teamwork goes hand-in-hand with the technology behind such rapid communication. Besides City Hall staff, evaluators from Community Emergency Response Teams, the L.A. County Fire Department and the city of Rolling Hills also participated in the drill, which lasted more than two hours.

“Putting together a drill like this in eight weeks is quite a challenge, but it’s also quite an accomplishment,” Calhoun said. “We did at least four hours a week of intensive staff training. That is a real commitment for a city with a busy staff.”

Michelle Fisher is a freelance writer.



On Oct. 21, the city of Rancho Palos Verdes participated in the Great California Shakeout drill, a statewide exercise designed to test the preparedness of a city’s administration and emergency personnel during a major earthquake. Helping RPV during the drill was a new software program, Incident Management System, created by Palos Verdes on the Net. The software enables the command center to manage messages from a number of sources.