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North Orinda fire evacuation drill runs smoothly

By Sora O'Doherty



Station 45 was filled with volunteers who assisted in the Jan. 26 drill. Photos Sora O'Doherty

Tiernan, 151 people signed up for the drill, and 130 actually registered for the system. During the evacuation drill, 225 emails were sent, along with 225 text messages and 275 telephone calls. A success rate of 85 percent was achieved on the telephone calls, and every person who registered for an alert received alerts in multiple ways. Most received the alert within three minutes and the rest upon retries within 8 minutes. Alerts were completed by 7:03 a.m.

After receiving the alerts, evacuees traveled from their homes to the intersection of Miner Road and Lombardy Lane. From there, law enforcement and Community Emergency Response Team volunteers directed traffic along Miner, which was closed to eastbound traffic and all lanes converted to westbound only as far as the intersection of Camino Pablo. Evacuees then drove southbound on Camino Pablo to the Highway 24 on ramps.

According to Dennis Rein, MOFD emergency preparedness coordinator, 20 County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue volunteers walked the neighborhoods and simulated a door-to-door check. The SAR teams were able to check over 200 homes in about 45 minutes and communicate evacuation status back to the command post via an application being developed by the county Department of Information Technology. Community volunteers from both Lamorinda CERT and the Lamorinda Radio Interest Group were used in this drill, as they had been in the earlier drill. The volunteers were deployed along with professional first responders to provide traffic safety and help collect data along the evacuation routes.

The first pulse of evacuating cars at 7:09 a.m. was led out by a fire engine. The evacuation was fast and smooth, and those cars reached the freeway at 7:18 a.m. The difference between this drill and the earlier drill along Moraga Way was that this drill covered more ground more quickly. All evacuees were out of the area well before 8 a.m., when Miner Road was restored to its usual two-way flow.

According to Rein, the Evacuation Decision Support System being developed by MOFD was also tested that morning. This was the first full-cycle, field test of the tool. Beginning with a small fire detection, modeling potential fire spread, recommending evacuation areas and finally maintaining a common operating picture for fire, law enforcement and community warning was an amazing success. MOFD looks forward to future developments and implementation. The drill was recorded by a drone as part of this system and the first pulse of the evacuation was also recorded from the leading fire engine.

Other observers and participants that Rein identified included the Office of Emergency Services, the Moraga and Lafayette police departments, MOFD's Communications-Support Unit, the Reno Fire Department and the Kensington-El Cerrito CERT. Orinda Police Chief Mark Nagel said during the debriefing that there actually was an incident on the evacuation route during the drill: a car stalled and the evacuation team was able to quickly figure out how to continue the drill. The drill, he said, was really important, and so much was learned.

Video of the drill captured by the drone and from the fire engine is available to view on the MOFD website at www.mofd.org/announcements/north-orinda-evacuation-exercise-update.



Both lanes of Miner Road were used to move vehicles swiftly out of North Orinda.

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