

Daily Journal

Small-scale model prepares firefighters for large disaster

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MILLVILLE -- A lone female voice rang out Sunday over the once lifeless radio transmitter, sparking a whirring -- yet simulated -- chain of events.

As part of the drill, firefighters raced to contain the conflagration that swept through the Fath building on High Street.

Sirens wailed as a cavalcade of fire engines sped to the scene.

Except this time, the fire engines that roared were no bigger than Matchbox cars.

Welcome to the Abbottville Training Simulator, a tabletop training exercise designed to mimic the conditions of real emergency scenarios.

Carefully laid out on an enormous table, the miniature cityscape known as "Abbottville" made a special appearance Sunday at the Millville Fire Hall.

With streets marked High, Vine, Oak and Broad, the tabletop town took the form of a mini-Millville.

Orange and black spray-painted cotton balls strategically placed in a miniature building set the initial scene: a fire had erupted at the Fath building on High Street.

"I'm more nervous doing this than I am the real thing," said Cumberland County 9-1-1 Center dispatcher Heather Hee, who broke the news over a radio transmitter.

Donning bright safety vests displaying their respective command posts, 25 public safety workers at the fire hall manned their stations.

Command School Inc. instructor Ron Richards distributed injury cards from his "box of surprises" -- as one firefighter jokingly put it -- prompting emergency crews to respond to the fire's human casualties.

Firefighters were taught to manage and delegate responsibility, coordinate an emergency situation and procure mutual aid.

A post-training critique helped them identify their mistakes and hone their skills.

The doughnuts at a nearby table may have been larger than the model fire trucks, but the scenario itself was larger than life.



Staff photo/Craig Matthews

Vineland Capt. Fred Mastrogiovanni, Capt. Terri Delvicario, Lt. Rick Lappine, firefighter Pat Wettstein and firefighter Keith Mitchell examine a model city, the Abbottville Training Simulator, at the Millville Fire hall in preparation for possible emergency situations.

"I didn't realize how realistic it would be with the radios and all the noise in the background," said Mike Lippincott, 39, a volunteer firefighter with Millville who received high praise for his role at operations command. "I was really impressed."

Firefighter Chuck Seiferman hailed the uniqueness of the training exercise, which had never been seen before at the fire department.

"It keeps you enthused," said Seiferman, 53, a career firefighter with Millville.

Millville Battalion 31 Chief Ric Kuhns immediately noticed the training's impact on the men and women riveted to the events unfolding on the tabletop and over handheld walkie-talkies.

In the future, Kuhn hopes the fire department can create its own mini-Millville to critique real scenarios after they happen.

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