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Mass Evacuation: Planning for the Evacuation of Special Needs Populations

SUMMARY

Emergency managers should develop clear, concise plans that address the evacuation of their special needs populations in the event of an incident.

DESCRIPTION

On October 5, 2006, at approximately 9:38 a.m., the Apex Fire Department (AFD) responded to a report of a chlorine odor at a street intersection in Apex, North Carolina. AFD Engine Company 3 reported a large vapor cloud upon arrival to the scene at approximately 9:43 a.m. and immediately requested a second alarm. The fire chief arrived soon thereafter and established the incident command post. The Apex Police Department (APD) activated the Apex Reverse 9-1-1 system, which provided residents with relevant emergency and shelter-in-place information. APD officers also went door-to-door to evacuate those residents living downwind of the gas cloud.



Apex EMS Evacuates Nursing Home Residents

AFD reconnaissance teams could not determine the source of the chlorine release throughout the initial response and evacuation. However, a fire eventually burned through the roof of the nearby Environmental Quality Company and released a plume of unknown chemical vapors. AFD immediately sounded a general alarm that recalled its entire staff to respond to the incident, and APD recalled its officers for extended evacuation duties. AFD personnel and contract firefighters did not begin offensive operations until the fires died down at 9:00 a.m. the next day. APD and Apex Emergency Medical Services (EMS) worked throughout the night to evacuate 17,000 Apex residents with the cooperation of the Apex school board.

The evacuation of a nearby nursing home presented unique challenges for emergency response personnel. All of the nursing home's 100 residents required wheelchairs or gurneys to be moved. With public transportation and school buses, Apex EMS coordinated the evacuation of the nursing home to three area hospitals in Wake County, NC. Apex EMS completed the evacuation of the nursing home residents in approximately 4 hours.

For additional information on the incident and the response, please see the [US Fire Administration Chemical Fire in Apex, North Carolina Report](#).

Prior to the fire, Apex lacked plans that addressed the evacuation of the town's nursing home and other special needs populations. Consequently, this forced Apex EMS to conduct the evacuation of the nursing home in an ad hoc manner. The US Fire Administration noted the success of Apex's evacuation but observed that "a clear, concise plan for special needs populations in emergencies should be part of the county plan."

Emergency managers should develop clear, concise plans that address the evacuation of their special needs populations in the event of an incident.

CITATION

Department of Homeland Security, United State Fire Administration. *Technical Report Series: Chemical Fire in Apex, North Carolina*. April 2008.

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