

Crisis exercises prepare workers

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

There was only one child still in Spirit Mountain Casino's Playworld & Arcade facility when the first explosion occurred.

It wasn't an actual explosion, but an imaginary event that kicked off the casino's second crisis exercise, created in concert with West Valley Fire District and the Polk County Sheriff's Office.

These exercises have been in the works since Feb. 23, when four months of classroom training began in response to a National Indian Gaming Commission directive last December.

"A lot of people will want to come into the facility," Neil Jacox told about 30 volunteers as the exercise got under way. Jacox is the casino's Security Floor supervisor and point man for the casino in the exercise.

Volunteers included members of the casino's Fire Brigade and medical first responders as well as casino security staff, and a number of unrelated volunteers among Tribal and casino employees.

"Your job is to keep track of who goes in and who comes out," said Jacox. "And you've got to be assertive."

Inside the facility, responders worked with individuals and groups as the game machines blinked, rang and buzzed.

Volunteers put themselves in a number of roles. Some were among the "walking wounded" victims of the explosion; others pretended to be hurt more severely. First responders raced into the Playworld facility, some to "triage," or see who needed what services, others to take care of the wounded in order of importance.

Each victim was to be tagged with black, if dead; red, if they needed immediate care; yellow, if they were injured, like a sprain, but not in need of immediate care; and green for the walking wounded, who might have a cut or two, but otherwise could exit the facility on their own.

Tribal members and casino employees Angela Sears (Marketing coordinator) and Jocelyn Huffman (Marketing Sponsorship coordinator) played an aggressive reporter and photographer during the first exercise. During this exercise, I played the reporter (and was the reporter) and *Smoke Signals* photographer Michelle Alaimo played the photographer (and was the photographer) in the second exercise.

Unless the dead were in the way of helping others, they were to be left in place for later police evaluation. And the media got more or less the same treatment.

"I want them to understand that the media can be quite aggressive," said Jacox. "We want to make sure that personnel don't become part of the situation."

Kevin Clark, West Valley Fire District Division Chief in charge of fire training as well as casino liaison, noted that media often play an important role in letting people



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Above, Cliff Bennett, middle, a West Valley Fire District firefighter/paramedic, is helped out by Jonathan Chancery, left, a security shift supervisor at Spirit Mountain Casino, and Valerie Vinson, a security officer at the casino, during a crisis training exercise at the casino's Playworld & Arcade on Tuesday, Nov. 16. Bennett played one of the walking wounded victims with chest pains and Chancery and Vinson were first responders, which they really would be if there was an emergency at the casino.



Smoke Signals reporter Ron Karten, left, is updated by Public Information Officer Neil Jacox during a crisis training exercise at Spirit Mountain Casino's Playworld & Arcade on Tuesday, Nov. 16. Jacox is a security floor supervisor at the casino and was playing the PIO for the exercise and Karten was playing a reporter for the exercise and actually reporting on the training for *Smoke Signals*.

know to stay away from an area, and sometimes in being the eyes and ears of the first responders, when that's necessary.

The same treatment was in store for parents who might, in a real explosion, rush to the building to find out about their children. They, too, had to be kept out of the crisis scene.

"It's a really difficult task," said Jacox.

Playworld & Arcade manager Tom Bland, who was not part of the exercise, said that on weekends, Playworld could be host to hundreds of children.

People had fun with the practice, too.

Casino Human Resources Training specialist Vicki Merrill, who played a severely injured victim, said from a gurney, "I've been throwing turkeys (given out for Thanksgiving) since 5:30 this morning, so if I have to lie down for a few minutes, I'm OK with that."

In the exercise, Jacox played the public information officer, and told

the media that the cause of the explosion was not yet known.

"At this point, there is no reason to believe this is anything but an accident," he said. "Our biggest concern is taking care of our guests and employees. Buildings can come and go."

Under normal circumstances, Spirit Mountain Casino Chief Executive Officer Rodney Ferguson or his assistant, Danita Trombla, Executive Secretary, act as public information officer, said Jacox.

There was some concern about how responders would act in a real incident.

"It's overwhelming," said Samantha Morey, Emergency Medical Services trainer for the West Valley Fire District. "There can be so many victims, and you ask yourself, 'Do you want to help the crying baby or the person with blood all over them?' Basically, you want to make order out of chaos."

"They'll know exactly what to do in a real scenario," said Jacox. "When things go south, (trained)

people do a good job."

The training also has included handling fires and buildings filled with smoke. Jacox also is working with the Oregon Department of Transportation to set up traffic control training.

To date, Spirit Mountain Casino has never had a major incident, said Jacox, although first responders have delivered babies and brought people back from heart events that left them without a pulse.

"During an actual event our quick response while waiting for West Valley fire and medical personnel could make the difference in minimizing major property damage and injuries to our guests and employees," Jacox said.

"Our hope," said Joann Mercier, a Tribal Elder and Director of Security for the casino, "is that we never have a major incident, but if one occurs, we want to be prepared."

"Our priority has been and always will be the safety and security of our guests and employees. With our Spirit Mountain Casino Fire Brigade and the first responders in place, trained and ready to help, we anticipate working effectively and cooperatively with the West Valley Fire District and Polk County Sheriff's Office." ■