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Idaho Free Press, June 20, 2008, by Bryan Dooley

Exercise Tests Medical Emergency Plans

West Valley Cities Work on Coordination

CANYON COUNTY — Here's the scenario, although it didn't really happen Thursday:

A major earthquake in a neighboring state has knocked out power to upper floors at both Mercy and West Valley medical centers. The elevators are out of service, the lower levels are full and the patients must be evacuated. Emmett's Walter Knox Memorial Hospital provided tents to both Canyon County hospitals for evacuation, and some Mercy patients were evacuated to the nearby Nampa Recreation Center.

Representatives of both hospitals said a simulation of that series of events Thursday is a major part of efforts to ensure staff and local government agencies are on the same page and ready to act should any emergency situation arise. The drill only involved the upper floors of each hospital to avoid disturbing real patients. "We're taking the time to plan and prepare to respond and cooperate with other agencies," Mercy spokesman Ken Taylor said. "If you work and you train together you're better prepared if a real need ever arises."

While similar training exercises have been routine for years — both hospitals conduct such drills at least once annually with even more frequent tabletop simulations — interagency cooperation has become a major priority since Hurricane Katrina, Taylor said. The drills help ensure everybody is working on the same system and knows what is expected of them in case responsibilities shift during an extended disaster situation, he said. "This kind of drill covers a variety of disasters; it helps us prepare for any situation where people would have to be moved out," West Valley spokesman and state Sen. John McGee said. "We work with other hospitals, we work with Canyon County Paramedics, so it's really a joint effort."

Emergency responders helped hospital workers hustle Job Corps students role-playing as patients with a variety of conditions and needs down flights of stairs using specially engineered "stair chairs." Hospital personnel adopted special disaster roles, with prepared files listing their duties and responsibilities and aprons displaying emergency titles to make them easily identifiable, McGee and Taylor said. Mock medical files were prepared for the patients, and staff rushed to provide treatment and medication where necessary and accommodate those with reduced mobility. Some patients walked, some were transported by golf cart or wheelchair and some were loaded into ambulances on gurneys. Both hospitals were also on a state emergency conference call that, in the event of an actual disaster, would help hospitals and agencies throughout the region coordinate efforts and locate open beds for patient transfers.