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Rifle mock accident yields real-life experience

Re-2, emergency services learn from staged crisis situation

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Following a major accident in Rifle early Saturday afternoon, Nick Fetchik, 17, of New Castle, sat in the front of an Re-2 school bus with a pen stuck through his cheek. His mouth, hands and bus seat were covered with blood.

Moments after the crash, bus driver Jackie Kneedler, who drives Route #24 between New Castle/Silt to Rifle immediately went into action, calling 911 dispatch for help, seeing if the kids on her bus were OK and determining the nature of their injuries.

Fortunately, it was all a drill for area emergency service responders to practice their training in the event of a real emergency.

The mock crisis drill was held Saturday afternoon in the back parking lot of the Rifle Fire House off Railroad Avenue and was put on by the Re-2 School district along with the Rifle Fire Department and other local emergency service agencies. The scenario was that of a semi-trailer which had crashed into two school buses at the intersection of Highway 6 & 24 and the Highway 13 bypass. Emergency service agencies from the Rifle Fire Department, Rifle Police Department, Garfield County Sheriff's Office and Burning Mountains Fire Protection District responded to the "accident."

Prior to the start of the training drill, Fire Marshal Kevin Whelan of the Rifle Fire Department addressed a crowd of bus drivers to explain the purpose of the drill and how emergency personnel should respond.

"Triage is the French word meaning to sort," Whelan explained. "It's the classification of patients. It's the job of the first responders to decide where we can do the most good for the most amount of people. We have to make some hard decisions."

Once given the "go" signal at 1 p.m. to start the drill, the actors went into character.

"Is everybody OK in here?" Kneedler screamed as she made her way to the back of the bus, checking out all the children. "Is there anyone that can't breathe?"

Many of the kids were "wounded" and "bleeding" and sustained a range of injuries — some very serious and some minor.

A "citizen" then came on the scene and began to help Kneedler in handling the injuries until emergency personnel arrived.

Police, EMTs and fire department personnel were there within a few minutes.

The second bus in the scene was actually tipped over and kids could be heard screaming from inside while a member of the Rifle Fire Department worked to saw open the door with an electric saw in order to get to them.

"I'm going to die, I'm going to die!" one girl wailed as she was taken out and put on a stretcher.

Another bloodied and injured boy laid on the ground as a Rifle police officer kneeled over him until he could be taken for medical care.

And as injured kids were brought out from both buses, hysteric parents began arriving on the scene.

"Where're my kids at? Where're my kids at?" one distraught father ran around the accident site screaming.

Police were forced to handcuff the man to get him under control and place him in the back seat of a patrol car.

For more than an hour and a half, the emergency workers worked on the victims.

To the side, the "driver" of the semi-truck which caused the accident could be seen sitting on the ground by the side of his semi truck screaming in agony at the accident he had just caused. According to the scenario, the driver was a drug addict who was high at the time of the accident.

All in all, there was a total of 51 injuries between the two buses.

"This mock crisis is a great opportunity for Garfield Re-2 to build relationships with our emergency service organizations and to prepare in the event of a real crisis," said Garfield Re-2 Superintendent David Smucker. "Garfield Re-2 will be seeking a better understanding into the incident command system, as well as testing our resources in the areas of logistics, student information and communications."

Training Division Chief Bill Hodgden with the Rifle Fire Department, who was instrumental in putting the drill together at the request of the Re-2 school district, said he was pleased with how the drill turned out.

"I feel it went very well," Hodgden said afterwards. "We'll still do a formal critique and an after-incident review. Mass casualty incidents are not very common in our area; therefore, we need to train so when they do happen, we are able to perform at our very best level. Practice is the only way to get there."

A taping of the mock crisis drill will be available on public access Channel 10 through the city of Rifle in the next month or so.

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