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New White Plains medical team treats victims during rescues

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When people are injured in fires, construction accidents or other disasters large and small, getting fast, advanced medical treatment can mean the difference between life and death. The problem, in many cases, is that victims get little medical attention until they've been rescued and carried to an ambulance.

White Plains is trying to change that, with the establishment of a new medical rescue unit of highly trained police officers and firefighters with expertise in both technical rescue operations and emergency medical treatment. The unit specializes in providing advanced life support to victims as they are being rescued, while other first responders deal with whatever calamity caused the injuries.

Frank Straub, the city's public safety commissioner, said he first saw the need for such a team when he was a New York City police officer, responding to the Sept. 11, 2001, World Trade Center terror attack. His impression was reinforced when he came to White Plains seven years ago, during the downtown development boom, when the department responded to a few construction accidents.

Last year, during a high-rise disaster drill at the Avalon Bay development with scenarios that included a gunman shooting from the building and an explosion with multiple injuries, Straub and other observers saw that although civilian ambulance crews arrived quickly and were ready to treat victims brought to them, they were not prepared to enter the building under dangerous conditions.

"That's when it crystalized and we began looking at ways to address what we perceived as a gap in service," Straub said. "There was a need to provide advanced levels of emergency medicine in incidents where it is difficult to quickly remove victims and get them to an ambulance."

With help from Rep. Nita Lowey, D-Harrison, the city obtained more than $300,000 in federal grants to cover training and equipment costs, allowing the team to be established at no cost to taxpayers.

Modeled after a similar unit in New York City, White Plains' "rescue medical team" is the only unit in Westchester County that can provide advanced life support measures, including defibrillation and the administration of intravenous medications, during tactical situations. Straub said the RMT would be available to any community in the county during an emergency.

Seven police officers and five firefighters have been trained to the paramedic level, with three now trained as intermediate level emergency medical technicians. All are volunteers assigned to other duties. They train together for emergencies and can be quickly assembled when the need arises.

In a drill at the old Post Road Elementary School recently, team members were called on to treat and rescue a victim who had fallen three stories down a shaft from the roof. The "victim," a 160-pound manikin, was sprawled on the ground. On the roof, a crew secured ropes around a skylight to anchor lines that team members would use to rappel down to the victim. As a precaution, additional anchor lines were attached to another structure on the roof.

Deputy Fire Chief Donald Keinz said the secondary anchors would most likely not be set up in a real
"In a real-world event, we'd be working a lot more rapidly," he said. "Objective number one is to get to the victim as quickly as possible."

Once the spider web of lines was secured, Police Officer Hector Fuentes pushed off the roof ledge and made his way down to the victim, carrying an oxygen tank, intravenous fluids, bandages, medicine and other supplies in a red knapsack. He began life-support measures immediately, and was soon joined by another team member. As they worked on the patient, others arrived to "package" the victim in a basket-like stretcher, securing "him" so he could not move.

Team members on the roof then began hauling the stretcher up, using a combination of ropes, pulleys and brute strength. Fuentes rode up with the stretcher, keeping tabs on the victim's condition and on the progress of the rescue. Once back on the roof, the patient was moved out of the way and treatment continued.

"This definitely can save lives," Fuentes said afterward. "It allows us to give victims the highest level of pre-hospital care under the most hazardous conditions."

The scenario was repeated a short time later, with Officer Ydania "Dannie" Rodriguez rappelling for the first time in her four-year police career. Rodriguez, the only woman on the team, got applause from her colleagues as she easily made her way from the roof to the ground.

"I volunteered for this because I think the more training you can get, the better off you'll be," she said. "Time is of the essence in a situation like this. The only way to get to the victim was by rappelling, so that's what we had to do."

Rodriguez said she focused on the job at hand and didn't think twice about stepping backward off the roof to begin her descent.

"Actually, it was pretty cool," she said.