

# Bottlenecks arise in mock attack

Bioterror 'event' checks readiness for high school

By Jonathan Sidener

The Arizona Republic

Nov. 22, 2002

Officers with assault rifles and paramedics armed with hypodermic needles invaded Mesa's Westwood High School on Thursday.

The men and women in uniform were part of a daylong drill at the school to see how ready health, emergency and military systems are to deal with a bioterror attack.

But the mock attack also helped provide a day of distraction for Westwood students. Some got breaks from class to participate in the drills. Others stared at the onslaught of TV satellite trucks and emergency vehicles surrounding the gym. Several football players on the way to practice were particularly enthralled with the officers' combat weapons.

The bioterrorism training began at 9 a.m. as paramedics and public health nurses began dishing out tetanus shots to students. Slightly more than 3,000 students from Mesa's six high schools, including 500 at Westwood, received the free shots.

Students knew they were getting shots they needed by January, but unless they read about it in the newspaper, they didn't know they were contributing to national emergency planning.

"They just told us we needed tetanus shots," student Tracy Theriot said.

While emergency officials routinely conduct mock drills, the opportunity to immunize thousands of students added realism this time around, said Mary Cameli, deputy chief of the Mesa Fire Department.



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"Ow," says Denae Woods, 15, a sophomore at Westwood High School in Mesa as Firefighter Steve Ward gives her a tetanus shot during a mock bioterror drill held Thursday as a practice session for emergency crews.

"We've done many of these on the tabletop, but the chance to do it hands-on is the best," Cameli said. "We had some kids faint and some signs of anxiety, things we wouldn't have seen if we weren't giving real shots."

In the drill immunizing students, emergency workers discovered bottlenecks when the paperwork went faster than the needlework, Cameli said. On the one hand, giving shots to 3,000 students in two hours is an accomplishment, she said. But it's still a small sample of the number of people who might need inoculation in a real emergency.

Wednesday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta sent a shipment of mock antibiotics to Tucson from one of 12 secret locations that make up the National Pharmaceutical Stockpile. Thursday morning, emergency workers in Tucson unpacked and sorted the labeled, but empty, pill bottles. Some bottles remained in Tucson for a drill there today.

A team of Department of Public Safety officers escorted the supplies to Mesa. Wearing flak jackets, combat boots and helmets, they guarded the cargo until it was carried into the gym.

Inside, 200 adult volunteers waited for antibiotics to treat their fake anthrax.

Volunteer "victims" went through a medical screening process and waited to meet with one of the pharmacists, who dispensed the fake antibiotics from Tucson.

Mostly, they waited.

Christine Mahon, of the Maricopa County Public Health Department, said the afternoon drills had also turned up some bottlenecks. Officials will look for ways to smooth out those areas in case of a large-scale crisis.

We're testing our process," Mahon said. "If we can do well with hundreds of people, then we could do well with thousands."

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