



# Newport News Sheriff's Office

224 26<sup>th</sup> Street; Newport News, VA 23607 • 757.926.8535 • fax: 757.926.8429



## VIRGINIA SHERIFF

Contact:  
Kathleen Carey, PIO  
Newport News Sheriff's Office  
Office: 757.926.8747  
Cell: 757.813.6139  
E-mail: kcarey@nngov.com

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### Fire Evacuation Drill Practiced at Newport News City Jail

by

Lt. Kathleen Carey, PIO

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Nearly 200 U.S. Navy sailors sat behind bars at the Newport News City Jail recently. No, they were not arrested as part of a massive sting operation. Instead, they played a key role in a massive fire evacuation drill.

The Newport News Sheriff's Office tests its fire alarms routinely. But when it comes to saving lives, Sheriff Gabe Morgan said that "routine" wouldn't cut it. He and his command staff orchestrated the evacuation of two complete floors of inmates.

"Sheriffs," Morgan stressed to his counterparts, "if you haven't physically executed your contingency plan, I suggest you do. Don't count on only your paper plan to carry you through in a real emergency."

The mock evacuation was a cooperative effort between the Sheriff's Office, the USS Carl Vinson, the Newport News Fire Department, and Hampton University. Fire Chief Kenneth Jones said it is one thing to have an evacuation plan. "But how do you know if the plan works if you don't exercise it? It is critical to work through something," said Fire Chief Jones, applauding the Sheriff's Office for initiating this drill.

The drill took place on April 27. The fire department released its findings on August 15.

Col. Michael Eaves is the Chief Deputy of the Newport News Sheriff's Office. He explained that it was very important to conduct the exercise without stacking the staffing numbers. That way the results would not be skewed. Additional deputies were only brought in to manage the inmates who were transported to a safe and secure location for the duration of the drill.

Sailors with the USS Carl Vinson were briefed. Then they assumed the role of the inmates. "The Navy personnel were excellent. We couldn't have accomplished this without them," thanked Col. Eaves.

There were three phases to this field exercise. The first drill consisted of timing deputies on how long it would take to unlock the cells on the seventh floor. The fire department's stopwatch clocked 2:22.

For the second drill, the deputies evacuated the seventh floor of the jail. The two deputies working the floor were timed from the initiation of the alarm to the last person stepping to the exterior of the building. Eighty-eight Navy personnel were evacuated in under eight minutes.

The third and final drill was the most real life exercise. It included smoke being pumped onto the sixth and seventh floors. With smoke introduced, the deputies had to use their SCBA (Self Contained Breathing Apparatus). In addition, the heavy smoke clouded their vision. It was virtually blinding. It showed how well each deputy knew the layout of his or her section of the jail.

"The deputies stayed on track with what they were supposed to do. Even with the added stress of smoke, alarms, and on-lookers, they handled things well," said Capt. Janie Vergakis, Jail Administrator. Despite the inherent difficulties of maneuvering through an old building, Capt. Vergakis complimented her deputies for a job well done.

The fire department report said the deputy using the SCBA "expeditiously" located the area where the smoke started and used the public announcement system to tell control about the problem. Cell doors started to unlock and people began to file out and work their way down the stairwell following the commands of the deputies.

Remember, all the while, a stopwatch ticked away. The fire department observed and documented every action. The floors were cleared in 7:44. The deputies conducted a secondary search and exited the building themselves at the 10:17 minute mark.

The purpose of the drill was to identify the flaws in the system and to fix them. It is true that the execution by the deputies did uncover some human weaknesses. But the biggest weakness is in the structure itself. On that, there is a consensus.

"I am concerned with the occupancy load," declared Fire Chief Jones. He continued, "It is excessive for the structure of the building." He suggested a secured steel staircase on the outside of the jail.

Capt. Vergakis pointed out, "The building was designed to keep people in. Fire escapes were put in after the fact. That includes the front (fire escape). Safety was an afterthought."

There are very few people advocating for the jail population. However, Col. Eaves summed it up best, "This is a human issue. We are responsible for humans in our care. We owe it to them to find a solution."

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