



Newport News Sheriff's Office

224 26th Street; Newport News, VA 23607 • 757.926.8535 • fax: 757.926.8429



MEDIA RELEASE

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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EVACUATION -- READY OR NOT Gas Leak Forces Jail Evacuation

by

LT. Kathleen Carey, PIO, Newport News Sheriff's Office

On March 13 at 10:45 a.m., a call went out over the radio, "Evacuate the 7th Floor." Captain Janie Vergakis, Jail Administrator with the Newport News Sheriff's Office, Newport News, Virginia made the decision to start moving inmates from the top floor of the jail to fresh air in the recreation yard. This was not a drill. A gaseous smell was detected on several floors of the jail but was most noticeable at the top.

"It smelled strong for awhile," explained Lieutenant Gerald Grogan about the smell in his third floor office. "But we smelled it as it was traveling up the building. Elevator shafts are like vacuums. That's how the gas got in to start with. The elevator shaft sucks it all in and pulls it up the building."

The gas settled on the 7th floor and got trapped. Deputies made sure no human got trapped along with it. Lt. Grogan and Sergeant Kandyce Patrick realized there was a possibility of a real emergency. They started getting everyone in place so that when the call came to exit the jail, all they had to do was swing the gates and direct everyone out.

Mary Thomas was one of the inmates evacuated that morning. "I can't even begin to tell you exactly how we got downstairs. We went through so many different stairwells, so many different floors. It was like playing follow the leader, basically."

Sheila Hayes was in another cellblock. She described how quickly deputies got them out. "They responded really fast. When the smell got worse, they came back and evacuated us and told us what was going on. Talking to us, yes, that eased my mind."

The inmates followed directions very well. There was no panic, only calm curiosity. "I think it's because I went up there and told them we were going to evacuate the floor. I didn't leave them in the dark. I told them we have a possible gas leak. We're going to need to get you guys to fresh air," said Sgt. Patrick.

By sharing information and communicating directions clearly, deputies were able to prevent inmates from panicking. Nearly 100 female inmates were cleared from the top floor to the outside recreation yard in ten minutes. "And we probably lost 45 seconds because I had one female who was scarred of heights." The stairs are metal grates through which you can see straight down. "I had to stay back with her and walk slower with her." Had the urgency level been higher, Sgt. Patrick said they would have carried her down in an evacuation chair.

Coincidentally, on the very day of the jail's response to a potentially dangerous situation, the statewide Virginia Emergency Management Conference was being held locally. Representatives from around the Commonwealth of Virginia gathered for discussions and seminars on how best to prepare for unforeseen unusual circumstances. The theme of the conference was "It Could Happen Here." Attending that conference was LT. Colonel Eileen Sprinkle, the Newport News Sheriff's Office Operations Bureau Chief. "The theme of the conference couldn't have been more poignant. Here I am sitting in a room talking about the "what ifs" and my cell phone rings. I get a call that our jail is being evacuated. No kidding, it really can happen here. And did."

The Newport News Sheriff's Office has a history of being proactive with its contingency plans.

It was back in April of 2006, that the Sheriff's Office conducted a mock fire drill introducing fire onto a couple of floors. At that time, the Sheriff's Office coordinated with the U.S. Navy's USS Carl Vinson and used 200 of its sailors as stand-in inmates. "These are military personnel who follow directions well. They were a compliant group," said Sheriff Gabe Morgan. "What we were unsure of – until this gas leak today – was how well inmates would follow deputy commands. And they followed them really well."

Hayes said that's because her life depended on it. "There ain't no way out of here unless they (deputies) take us out. They got to unlock the gates to safety. So when they came and responded quickly, I knew we were safe."

Gratefully, the gas leak did not become a crisis. In fact, the source of the smell was never pinpointed by the gas company or the fire department. Once the 7th floor was evacuated, jail staff evaluated their next step. It was determined that it was unnecessary to clear any other floors, and the female inmates were allowed to return. The evacuation was precautionary and never mandated by the fire marshal.

What it did for the Sheriff's Office, however, was allow the Office to work its emergency evacuation plan. "You can have a plan on paper, or you can practice fire drills. But until you actually move inmates and work that plan, you don't really know how it's going to go," said Sheriff Morgan. "We learned things from the mock fire drill a couple of years ago, and we learned from this real life evacuation today. Most things we did really well. Some things we could do better. But overall, I am very pleased with the deputies. They handled this incident professionally. They executed their mission to safeguard the inmates, and civilian and non-essential personnel. The evacuation was orderly and timely."

Once the floor was cleared, the rooftop flaps were unhinged. That allowed gas that settled on the top floor to exit the building. After the air cleared, the gas dissipated, and the inmates returned to their cellblocks, an after action assessment was conducted.

Because this was an air related emergency, deputies should have grabbed their SCBA (Self Contained Breathing Apparatus). But no one did. "You do as you are trained," explained Lt. Grogan. "The only time we train to put on our air tank is when we hear the alarm. Because there was no audible alarm, it never crossed our minds to grab our air tanks." Grogan said in the future, they will automatically trigger the fire alarm regardless of the type of emergency. "I have no doubt with an alarm, it would trigger in everyone's mind to put their safety equipment on and proceed with the evacuation plan." Another lesson learned was to immediately notify the kitchen of an incident in order for personnel to cut the pilot lights to the stoves and burners.

The Newport News City Jail opened in 1976. It is rated to hold 248 inmates but has an average daily population closer to 700. The jail has no windows and is a difficult building to vent. Its fire escape routes are maze-like, snaking from the secured side of the structure to the unsecured side and back again until finally reaching the bottom floor. Should an incident become critical and a total evacuation mandatory, the top floor would be the most difficult to clear. That is the reason behind the initial evacuation of the 7th floor. "You have it in-play ahead of time," said Sgt. Patrick. She and the other deputies knew who was next to be evacuated and how. She was just waiting for the call.

To everyone's relief, there were no more evacuation calls. At least, not this time. But even the inmates know for sure that the Newport News Sheriff's Office is ready.

"To be honest, I have often wondered what if something did happen" admitted inmate Thomas. Inmate Hayes inserted, "They are on the scene first before the fire department, before anybody. The deputies gonna be the ones to take us to rescue." "The fact that they pulled the women off the floors first and got them out, that really made me feel safe, you know? They thought about us first and got us out before they did anybody else," concluded Thomas in a satisfied tone.

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