

Officials: Airline crash drill to be realistic

By GREG MARTIN
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PUNTA GORDA — At 10:20 a.m. Tuesday, a pilot at the Punta Gorda Airport will get on his radio and alert officials, "I just saw a plane crash!"

That call will set off alarms summoning dozens of Charlotte County firefighters, paramedics and deputies to the scene.

They'll encounter some 50 people spilling out from a busted fuselage, some badly injured, some dead.

They'll douse burning wreckage with foam and set up a triage station, and transport those they can save by the bus load to several area hospitals.

Meanwhile, members of the Charlotte County Airport Authority, the County Commission, the Punta Gorda City Council and the media will be watching from nearby bleachers to see how their community's

first responders perform.

That's because this plane crash will be just a drill.

"It's a full-scale exercise," said Dee Hawkins, spokeswoman for Charlotte County Fire/EMS.

The Federal Aviation Administration requires airports with airlines to hold such a drill every three years. This is the Punta Gorda Airport's second such drill.

Hawkins sees the training as crucial.

She points out accidents have happened at the airport. Recently, a small plane crashed into a fence.

The airport also has two commercial airlines. So the potential exists.

Responding to aviation disasters requires specialized training, she pointed out.

"It's one thing to do training in books and in bits and pieces, but when you have a full-scale drill, you have

an opportunity to test the system," she added.

The Experimental Aircraft Association Post 565 has volunteered to make two school buses look like a crashed plane. The buses will be draped with black plastic sheets. Numbers will be painted on their sides. Volunteers also will make mock wings out of PVC pipes, said Larry McClure, post commander.

Team Punta Gorda and the Civil Air Patrol have recruited more than 50 volunteer "passengers" for the ill-fated flight.

"We are the actors, the players," Parsons said. "We will give our volunteers a role to play. ... We'll have an injured blind man wandering around. They want to test how the local responders deal with that situation."

The actors will be made up to look like they've been through a plane crash by several Fire/EMS

training officers. The officers are skilled at "mou-lage," the art of this type of special-effects makeup, Hawkins said.

They do a good job — almost too good, according to Parsons. He recalled the makeup job three years ago.

"They've got body parts and they've got guts," he said. "The way they do it, I tell you what, anybody would think it's a movie set."

"When (the victims are) taken to the hospitals, they fool the pros," he added. "They fooled one emergency room. The medics were working on 'em like crazy."

The hospitals were participating knowingly in the drill, however, according to Hawkins.

"We want to make sure we are always at our very best for the chance that something comes in like this," she said.

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