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## Juvenile hall holds practice drill

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As juvenile hall wards fought during a PE class, took a teacher hostage and tried escaping the confines of the Youth Services Center, probation officials had one hope — that at least one thing would go wrong.

If the response team executed the search and extraction of the missing teens perfectly, they said, they might not find flaws in the system.

And Wednesday, more than three years after the county's youngest murder defendant inexplicably escaped from the just-opened, high-tech facility, not finding and fixing holes was definitely not the goal of the escape drill. Instead, the plan was making sure a real situation never again happened. Rather than replicate the highly-publicized flight of Josue Orozco, juvenile hall and probation officials upped the ante with a hostage situation.

The crisis kicked off after 9 a.m. when two wards — actually staff members posing as students lumbering through calisthenics — staged a fight on the field to distract from the bigger assault happening inside the classrooms to the left.

Code Orange, the call came.

The “students” were ordered to the ground while a radio call went out for two more staff members.

“That could be a problem,” said Larry Silver, deputy chief probation officer, watching from the dining room.

The request needed to be more specific: what staff members or from what department.

Nineteen minutes passed before the search team assembled in the dining room for a quick briefing and to look at mug shots of possibly missing students before heading toward the classrooms.

Too long already, said YSC Director Roy Brasil.

Door to door, the team assessed each classroom and marked them with a strip of hot pink duct tape to indicate it was clear. The same method would be used with wards in their rooms to speed up head count.

Inside the hallway, an injured teacher — again, a staff member playing a role — was hysterical.

“Mr. Mitchell is missing!”

In classroom six, an inmate might have been holding a female teacher hostage behind a screen in the corner. It was unclear and the search team was taking no chances, even as she yelled “Help me!” After she was finally freed, the staff took the juvenile to the ground and handcuffed him as he babbled about losing it because the teacher didn't let him have a phone call. He was hauled to a unit to be isolated and put on a seven-day program to earn back his rights. He could also pick up another case, although that was not the immediate concern.

The YSC currently has not hostage protocol, another item highlighted by the exercise and currently under way, according to Brasil.

A medical team arrived with a wheelchair to cart the teacher down the hallway but there was no rest for the response team. A kid was outside the gym, in the so-called birdcage area which is the completely fenced-in evacuation area right outside its doors. He was pinned inside, unable to open the doors back into the gym.

If he wasn't going anyway, should they prioritize other possible situations? The question would be posed post-drill along with other observations from those both acting and responding.

Shouldn't every person have a radio? One team of two split apart, leaving one without contact.

What if there aren't enough handcuffs or zip ties? That same hot pink tape works well.

Maybe there should also be earpieces. Staff needs to establish a perimeter. Nobody did a head count of teachers

which would have helped assess if the woman being held was a hostage taker, instead. Shouldn't there be more concern for the injured teachers than a simple order to "calm down?" Consider putting first aid kits in other parts of the campus for easy access and having extra supplies like gloves on hand when the search team first assembles. Does the central command center need more eyes? A final sweep of the school would erase any lingering questions about whether the situation was finished.

Leon Kennon, the YSC institution services manager, also had some impressions of the drill. Slow down. The team was too fast with the medical.

Kennon is specially trained in staging drills and was pleased to see that some staff caught up in the commotion weren't part of the exercise. Wards, walking in lines with their hands behind their back, had no idea, either. A high school exit exam was even inadvertently scheduled for the same day. It made everything more real.

While Wednesday's drill tested the Probation Department and YSC's procedures, the event also highlighted the participants' ability to communicate. Unlike adult correctional staff, employees at YSC are armed with little more than their ability to talk a ward down and diffuse a situation. Even pepper spray, used in some counties, is unavailable to encourage staff to use reasoning first, Brasil said.

As a result — plus some changes like juveniles eating meals in their units rather than a mixed-gender, mixed-gang affiliation dining room — serious incidents like assaults and legitimate suicide attempts are down. Where there was once 65 events, the YSC is on track for only 12 this year, Brasil said.

The drill, which officials say is the first of several for the county's juvenile correctional facilities and camps, is the first since Orozco's unexpected escape Feb. 14, 2008 with the help of two other wards. Orozco, arrested at age 14, was 17 and awaiting trial for murder when he grabbed a low-hanging halogen light and scaled a wall to freedom. Neither of two supervisors in charge of his housing unit were watching the trio play basketball. After the escape, a series of foibles in assessing who was missing gave Orozco a substantial head start and he remained at large until his apprehension in Texas that September.

The escape drew sharp criticism about operations at the Paul Scannell Drive facility and a trio of investigative reports offered up lists of improvements.

More than two years later, Brasil is helming the center and there's been substantial personnel housekeeping. Mesh covers the basketball court, the lights have been moved up and new policies say only one ward generally at a time can spend his daily exercise hours outside.

Many of the facility's weak points didn't come to light until after the escape, according to Silver and Chief Probation Officer Stuart Forrest.

Unlike designers and staff, those spending 24/7 within its walls have nothing but time to find the cracks and crevices in its veneer and to figure out how it operates. Drills like the one yesterday bring those Achilles' heels to the surface before something serious happens, Brasil said.

He and Kennon will take what they learned yesterday and assemble it into a final report. Although the staff — whose experience ranged from a few years to more than two dozen — obviously care about their wards, Brasil said there is always room for improvement and reminders that security and rehabilitation aren't mutually exclusive.

"You obviously pour yourself into these kids," Brasil told them. "But at the end of the day, it is still a jail."

Michelle Durand can be reached by e-mail: [michelle@smdailyjournal.com](mailto:michelle@smdailyjournal.com) or by phone: (650) 344-5200 ext. 102.