

# The Tonganoxie Mirror

## Top Stories

### Review shows few problems following nursing home fire

By Lisa Scheller, News Editor

Wednesday, August 23, 2006

**For a disaster, it was** about as good as one can get.

"We had 71 residents in the nursing home (when it) caught on fire," said Keith Yoder, Kansas City Metro regional coordinator for Kansas Homeland Security. "It was potentially one of the most disastrous things that could possibly happen.

"Those 71 patients were evacuated successfully, the fire was put out successfully and the building was saved and those 71 patients were relocated successfully without injuries, death or illness in a very difficult situation. It was 96 degrees outside that day."

Yoder wasn't just singing praises for Leavenworth County's emergency workers. He had just participated in Thursday's official review of the July 1 fire at Tonganoxie Nursing Center.

From the start, things clicked.

Fire Chief Dave Bennett said firefighters arrived 4 1/2 minutes after the laundry room fire was reported.

And by then, Bennett said, the nursing home staff was carrying out its evacuation plan, efficiently and effectively, moving residents outside. The fire started during shift change, so more than the usual number of nursing home employees were on hand.

"By the time we got there the evacuation was almost complete," Bennett said.

Firefighters quickly put out the fire and began removing smoke from the building. Other firefighters, and numerous other emergency workers, turned their focus to helping the home's residents, who temporarily waited in the shade of trees outside the building.

It would be a hectic 14 hours -- the residents were bused to the air-conditioned Tonganoxie Junior High School, where they stayed until moved to other facilities. It was two weeks until they returned to the nursing center.


Chuck Magaha, county emergency management director, was practiced in what to do. Last October, when rising water flooded Easton, 51 nursing home residents had to be evacuated. That time, as this time, residents were taken to the county-owned Broadway Heights in Leavenworth.

"It helped with this ... because I knew what to expect and the other responders knew what to expect," Magaha said.

There may have been glitches, Magaha and Yoder said, but they were relatively minor.

"We had so many people that communication was an issue, and we hope to get that somehow rectified," Magaha said.

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He noted that 170 emergency workers actively helped with the situation.

And, Magaha said, there was terrific cooperation among them.

"Leavenworth County is fortunate because we all do get along," Magaha said. "Even though we had some issues here, that doesn't mean that those issues were major issues -- no turf battles, anything like that -- as far as I'm concerned there's no such thing as turf battles in Leavenworth County. We have a fantastic team and it makes my job a lot easier."

Leavenworth County Commissioner Dean Oroke praised the nursing home staff.

"They functioned real well and for them to have their patients in the wheelchairs and out of the building in 4 1/2 minutes is almost unbelievable."

Oroke said it was fortunate Broadway Heights, which the county had closed the day before, was fully equipped.

"You could go in and take the sheets out of the closets and put them on the beds," he said.

Yoder stressed the urgency of the situation when the fire broke out.

"I don't think everyone understands what it takes to move 71 people," he said. "You can take someone out of their room, put them in a parking lot and within an hour you can have a real problem. ... And that didn't happen here because of the teamwork and the way the county worked together."

And, Yoder noted, other counties assisted as well.

In short, he agreed, this was almost a textbook case of how to handle a nursing home fire.

"It was about as close as you could get," Yoder said. "And there were a few lessons learned here."