

SOUTH AFRICA

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City of Johannesburg News: Firefighting Experts visit Johannesburg



The emergency management services has excellent community outreach programmes and is on its way to becoming a world-class facility, according to visiting firefighters.

A DELEGATION from the 911 Fund on a visit to Johannesburg had much praise for the City's emergency management services (EMS), which is gearing up to be able to manage any eventuality during the 2010 World Cup.

The EMS was commended for its excellent junior cadet training programme, its two training academies and various community outreach programmes by the three senior fire department officers who were in the city representing the fund.

With over 70 years of firefighting experience between them, the three were on an eight-day visit to Johannesburg to help the EMS achieve its vision of becoming a world-class emergency and disaster management service. A recent disaster simulation exercise in downtown Johannesburg showed that some fine-tweaking was still needed to make the EMS a world-class outfit.

The officers came from the United States and the United Kingdom and work for the fund on a voluntary basis. The 911 Fund is a global volunteer organisation working to enhance public safety worldwide. They visited various fire stations in Joburg, Be Safe centres and the Rietfontein Training Academy, and acted as observers during the recent simulation exercise, among other things.

Excellent programmes

"The community outreach programmes are phenomenal," confirmed Jeffrey Gaskin, a New York fire department captain, during a briefing session with the head of the EMS, Audrey Gule. The City has over 30 community programmes running, among them programmes geared for domestic servants and security personnel, fire and swimming safety programmes for children, a burn rehabilitation programme, first-aid training and volunteer programmes.

Although Gule was happy to accept the positive feedback, she said the EMS still had a number of challenges, among them gaps in skills development. It was also critical to put tried and tested international best practice principles in place. "Intelligence systems to inform our business are still lacking. We still work from a retrospective base," she felt.



Briefing: Head of the emergency management service, Dr Audrey Gule, Lieutenant Shaun Gascie, Jeffrey Gaskin and Brian Draper from the 911 Fund

Despite this, the two EMS training academies - Rietfontein and Florida Park - were rated highly by the visitors. "Both training academies are very well run and on top of their game," said Brian Draper, the chief fire officer for the Isle of Man in the United Kingdom. The 911 Fund visit was ultimately a sharing opportunity, he said, and they were able to take away learning experiences too.

But given its size, the delegation believed that Johannesburg needed greater firefighting capabilities. It had 29 fire stations when, in reality, it should have about 300, Gaskin said.

The City hopes to build strong specialisation capabilities in the form of hazardous materials management, terrorism and intelligence units as well as more generic medical and firefighting capabilities.

"The luxury of specialisation remains a major challenge," Gule confirmed. The majority of call-outs received by the EMS - 92 percent - are medical in nature with most of these patients without any form of medical aid cover.

In the next month, the EMS will begin building a world-class emergency command centre at its Martindale headquarters. The centre will be the first of its kind in Africa and will include a command centre, gym, swimming pool, executive boardroom, a heli-pad and offices. "It will be fully integrated with other City and provincial services," said the head of disaster management, Nongezo Mekgwe.

Planning for disaster

Although the recent simulation exercise in which a hazardous materials spill was staged in the inner city, did not run smoothly, the delegation still felt it served its purpose by pinpointing the problem areas in the EMS.

"It was a training drill; things are going to go wrong," said Sean Gascie, from the Oaklands fire department in the US. The delegation and two German specialists were on hand throughout the exercise as observers. Gule admitted that there was a clear challenge around communication but felt that training would smooth these problems out over time.

The EMS plans a number of simulation exercises for this year. EMS disciplines will have separate monthly exercises while bigger inter-departmental simulations, involving all City stakeholders, will be done every quarter.

"Our target date for having everything in place is May 2009," Gule confirmed.