

Utahns prepare for Great ShakeOut disaster drill

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On The Web

Learn about the Great Utah ShakeOut at www.shakeout.org/utah.

ST. GEORGE — Utahns are encouraged to assess their emergency readiness as part of the 2nd annual Great Utah ShakeOut statewide drill Wednesday morning.

Residents in Washington County schools, medical facilities and church congregations will follow the invitation to “drop, cover and hold on” as emergency personnel review procedures for rolling out in a large-scale community disaster.

“(My students) know that when I say the code words, that they all get under their desks and they pull their chair in until I give the all clear or the fire lights go on,” said Anissa Olivas, a fourth-grade teacher at Coral Cliffs Elementary School in St. George.

Washington County Amateur Radio Emergency Service members Boyd Borden, left, and Bob Vosper practice emergency communications with other radio operators Feb. 28 during preparations for Wednesday's Great ShakeOut earthquake drill at the emergency operation center in the Washington County Administration building in St. George. / Photo courtesy of Norm Smith

Olivas said she will spend about 20 minutes before the 10:15 a.m. mock 7.0 earthquake talking about what to do during an earthquake, and her students will get a homework assignment today that involves discussing emergency preparedness with their families, including what resources are needed and the importance of securing objects that may cause injury or damage during a massive temblor.

The administration will also announce over the school intercom that the earthquake drill is taking place, and once the earthquake is finished, the students will go into their fire drill response and gather in preassigned areas outside the building, Olivas said.

“On the Great Shakeout Web page, you can go on there and play the sound of an earthquake. So we will play that earthquake sound,” she said.

Washington County Emergency Services Director Pete Kuhlmann said the idea is that anyone prepared for an earthquake is prepared for “just about anything,” whether it involves other types of natural disasters, the loss of a job or disruptions in public utilities.

“The state’s trying to develop resilient communities,” he said. “We’re encouraging the public to discuss with their families what their emergency plans are.”

The Great ShakeOut website states there will not be any freeway closures, power outages or other simulated effects of the pretend earthquake unless a local government or utility company provides specific advance warning that it will do so. Nevada and Arizona also will hold ShakeOut events, but theirs will take place Oct. 17.

Because the ShakeOut is an annual event, it’s also a good time to review food stored in 72-hour kits to ensure it isn’t expired, he said.

“We always try to emphasize that how well prepared (people) are will determine how well they will survive,” Kuhlmann said. “Normal, everyday disasters are easy enough for (government agencies) to handle, but a 7.0 earthquake is very difficult for us to handle. ... If they’re relying on the government to take care of them, it may be over a week before we get to them.”

Norm Smith, the assistant emergency coordinator with the Washington County Amateur Radio Emergency Service, said WCARES will provide communications staffing in St. George at emergency operation centers in the county building at the corner of 200 East and Tabernacle Street, Dixie Regional Medical Center on River Road and the Southwest Utah Public Health Department on 600 South, as well as in some private residences.

WCARES's purpose will be to ensure that the dozens of agencies that call in information relating to damage or injuries from the simulated event will be able to get their message through to the health department and that the health department will then be able to communicate its information to Kuhlmann, Smith said.

Terri Draper, the communications director for Intermountain Healthcare's southwest region, said the event will allow DRMC to test its radio communications with Valley View Medical Center in Cedar City, Garfield Memorial Hospital in Panguitch and the Washington County EOCs.

"We've never done a test of this sort," she said. "Last year we did a hospital-wide drill right down to practice evacuations. ... (But) we will not be doing (that) this year."

The practice evacuations are planned every other year, so 2014 will be an on year for the test, she said. In the meantime, medical personnel are evaluating last year's performance and looking for ways to improve.

"We had a lot of learning opportunity experiences," she said.