

# Emergency training critical for local safety

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The emergency call went out after a worker who climbed down a manhole to retrieve a lost cell phone became disoriented and woozy.

Witnesses weren't sure how the man was hurt, or how badly. First responders had to figure out what happened, and how to bring him back to the surface.

With time running out, firefighters wearing oxygen masks and other heavy gear hoisted the body from the nine-foot manhole using a special sled and harness. The victim, in this case a 115-pound mannequin, was fine.

That training exercise and several like it were part of a two-day course on confined-space rescues that ended Aug. 21 at the York Sewer District.

Some 14 people from the Kittery Water District; York Water District; York Village Fire Department; York Beach Fire Department; Ogunquit Fire Department and York Sewer District participated in the training, according to sewer district superintendent Tim Haskell. The last such training was held in 2009.

Counting this year's participants, 25 utility workers from the three water districts have been trained in confined-space rescues. Another 18 firemen from the three departments have completed the training.

The course, taught by Tom Denison of Norway-based Life Safety Specialists Inc., highlighted best practices for utility workers whose job requires them to go underground to check valves and pipes or into enclosed spaces like water tanks. It also emphasized proper techniques to prevent additional injuries during a rescue.

"For the most part, we train employees to perform these rescues for their fellow employees," said Denison, a retired Auburn firefighter. "It's quite uncommon these days to have fire departments actually providing these services."

Don Neumann, supervisor of the York Water District, said utilities like his are required by the state to have a confined space rescue team available when workers enter tight spaces such as manholes, underground vaults and enclosed tanks.

Four years ago, the water and sewer districts and both York fire departments launched a Confined Space Emergency Response Team to be ready during these emergencies. The team has never been needed for a rescue, he said.

Firefighter Branden Walker of the Ogunquit Fire Department, who climbed down the manhole during Wednesday's drill, said working in tight spaces is no picnic.

"Down in there, it's dark, you can't see, there are 14- or 16-inch mains running through there so you are trying to dance around those, you're in the water and crap's falling on top of you and you're dealing with someone who is non-responsive," he said.

Brian Roy, also of the Ogunquit Fire Department, said working in confined spaces presents a different set of challenges than a typical structure fire. For instance, confined spaces could have hazardous gases that combust or cause loss of consciousness.

Crews must be trained to use sensors to detect oxygen levels and mechanical blowers to ventilate the spaces.

"That's a whole different scenario we have to worry about," he said.

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