

FAA: Air crash scenes dangerous

First responders advised to be prepared for anything

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MANCHESTER — Suburban and rural emergency volunteers can never know if they will face the dark side of aviation, when they are first on the scene after an aircraft has gone down in their community.

"An aircraft crash site is quite different from when you go out to a car crash," cautioned Eileen landola, an inspector with the Federal Aviation Administration, which hosted about 100 first responders Wednesday night at a training session along with the Ocean Air Support "Black Sheep" Squadron, the volunteer air wing of the Ocean County Sheriff's Department.



The accident path can be miles long, and the final evidence of destruction — the "debris field," in investigators' parlance — may be widespread across the ground, or even vertical, with evidence hanging in trees, landola said.

And the scene can be far more dangerous to police, fire and first aid workers. Electric fuel pumps can keep pouring high-octane aviation gas onto the ground. Rescuers can encounter hazardous chemicals, biological hazards from victims, even explosives, FAA trainers said.

Air accidents are still relatively rare compared to the nation's annual highway toll, with around 1,900 aircraft crashes and accidents reported each year, according to

the FAA. But more of those accidents happen away from airfields now, and the FAA has been holding accident response workshops to encourage local agencies to plan for crashes, said Mike Maino, safety and public affairs officer for the Black Sheep Squadron.

Last May's crash on Route 72 in Stafford that killed four people was an example of the challenges a crash can pose for both federal agencies and local authorities, landola said. In that case, Stafford police had to secure a wooded location alongside a busy highway for days while investigators documented the crash site and recovered wreckage.

At crash sites, FAA workers have noticed that while they suit up in protective biohazard clothing, few local responders take that precaution, landola said. So Dr. Parvez Dara, a physician and pilot with the FAA training team, gave the audience a talk on how crash sites can make them sick.

"It is probably one of the most dangerous things you do without knowing it," he stressed. "If you're a first responder, go to Target and buy yourself a \$2 (surgical) mask."

The destructive kinetic forces unleashed in an aircraft crash mean it's likely that victims' body fluids — and bacteria and viruses that can stay viable for hours — are all around a crash site and ready to infect responders, Dara said.

Emergency workers need to plan how they will conduct the grim work of locating and marking body parts. That will likely mean collecting tissue samples, too, as important evidence for crash investigators with the National Transportation Safety Board, Dara said.

Drug and medical tests are an important part of NTSB analysis, and FAA inspectors on their way to an accident always bring two kits for collecting toxicological samples — called "tox boxes," — landola said.

Emergency workers can visit local airports to familiarize themselves with aircraft types and equipment, like door latches and fire extinguishers, the FAA suggests. They need to also understand the myriad hazards a downed aircraft can pose to rescuers.

Learning how to turn off the master switch for a plane's electrical system can stop those drooling fuel leaks and reduce the chance of fire, instructors say.

When a military aircraft goes down, odds are it's carrying explosives — and not just in the gun magazine or on the missile racks. FAA instructors warn against touching a pilot's unused ejection seat, for fear of triggering the powerful rockets.

Some of that technology is showing up in civilian aircraft now, too. First responders learned how to watch out for ballistic parachute equipment, rocket-launched parachutes now sold as last-ditch emergency landing systems for Cirrus and Cessna aircraft.

Amid all the technical advice, landola also warned emergency workers to be prepared for the psychological after-effects of dealing with an air crash.

She recalled the scene of one high-speed commercial jet impact, where "the biggest piece that was left was like a foot, maybe eight inches" and the tattered impact area was dotted with small orange flags indicating body parts.

"I have to confess, I never expected that," landola said. "If you need to talk about it afterwards, do it."

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