

Closed hospital provides 'gold mine' for Grapevine SWAT training

■ A closed hospital offers a variety of exercises for tactical officers.

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GRAPEVINE — The acrid smell of gunpowder and debris from previous explosions filled a room Wednesday in Fort Worth's vacant St. Joseph's Hospital. Suddenly, a Grapevine SWAT member yelled out.

"Going hot! In five, four, three, two," shouted officer Jim Van Duzee, a member of Grapevine's special weapons and tactics unit, during a training session on explosive entry.

Bang!

Another SWAT team member immediately popped up and trained his weapon through a basketball-size hole in the wall, even before a black cloud of smoke dissipated.

The 17-member team had been practicing new entry techniques since early morning in the 15-story, non-air-conditioned building off Main Street south of downtown.

The former hospital's size, coupled with its variety of room layouts, makes the building perfect for such exercises, which have become increasingly important as Grapevine's population and the size of its buildings grow.

"With Gaylord [Texan Resort & Convention Center on Lake Grapevine] and other hotels ... this is really perfect practice for what we could face in Grapevine," said officer Jason Keller, who also works in crime prevention. "It has so much room; you can do several different scenarios."

The team trained in the building for the first time Wednesday, but Grapevine police officials said they hope to use it for practices as much as possible during the next year. Then, the new owner — Diversified Capital of New Jersey — will begin to renovate the building, which is more than 100 years old, and it will no longer be available for training.

"It's a gold mine," officer Larry Hallmark said of St. Joseph's, which closed as a hospital 10 years ago. The team regularly practices in one-story

buildings and empty houses, but at St. Joseph's the team can practice multilevel searches, hostage scenarios and other situations that require large spaces.

The explosive they used looks like a ruler-shaped piece of white wax and contains a C-4 plastic explosive. When blowing up a wall, officer Darin Yarbrough helped hang black intravenous bags filled with water, which cut down on dust.

"We can hang this on a wall and leave it there for several hours," Yarbrough told his team, which also includes three paramedics and a six-person negotiating group in addition to the 17 part-time SWAT members. Yarbrough took part in training offered by the Texas Tactical Police Officers Association last summer, so he could teach the rest of the team.

"It gives us another technique to get in," he said.

Before long, another shout went out. "Going hot," Van Duzee yelled.

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