**Showcasing the DNR: DNR incident management team responds to coronavirus**

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When it comes to fighting wildland fires, members of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources’ incident management teams are accomplished pros.

An Upper Peninsula team led by Brian Mensch also has helped with natural disasters such as the historic 2018 flooding that devastated parts of Houghton County.

But Mensch and his crew are now in all-new territory: downtown Detroit, where the team was recruited to help manage operations at the TCF Regional Care Center (in what was previously Cobo Hall).

The facility, established to care for COVID-19 patients, opened April 10.

“We’re doing a lot of different tasks related to operational and logistical support,” Mensch said. “We are tracking medical supplies, all food needs, special dietary needs for patients and staff, patient hydration needs, supplies to run the facility, security, the check-in process, medical supplies, the number of personnel in the facility, how fast supplies are used, the number of patients.”

The goal: Get everything into place when and where it’s needed and make sure that supplies don’t run short.

“We’re the nerve center, and we’re trying to apply the incident command structure to manage the facility and all the necessary related functions,” Mensch said.

The DNR incident management team is a small but critical part of the overall operations team at the TCF Regional Care Center. The alternate care facility includes a triage area, patient support services, staff changing areas, a pharmacy, administrative space and a command center.

A partnership of health care providers including Henry Ford Health System, McLaren Health Care, Beaumont Health and the Detroit Medical Center is providing support, staffing and resources, working with Michigan’s Department of Health and Human Services.

Mensch and four other DNR staffers – Rose Wilbur, Scott Lakosky, Glenn Palmgren and Peter Costa – are on a two-week assignment that started April 9. They are expected to remain at the TCF Center at least until April 24.

While Mensch is the incident management team commander, Lakosky oversees safety, Palmgren is planning section chief, Costa deals with operations and Wilbur is responsible for logistics.

Of the DNR’s four incident management teams, two are based in the Upper Peninsula and two in the Lower Peninsula, said Dan Laux, fire section supervisor for the DNR’s Forest Resources Division, which houses all four IMTs.

“Wildfire, floods, hurricanes, pandemic or whatever the incident, the management concept is the same,” Laux said. “The goal is to bring a level of organization to help respond to emergencies.”

Teams can vary in size. Some have a half-dozen members; others have many more depending on the incident. They most often include a leader, public information officer, liaison to work with other organizations, and people with planning, logistics and operations expertise.

“Incident management teams are the leadership we bring forward to put in a whole formula of checks and balances,” Laux said.

That includes identifying incident objectives and setting tactical guidance, along with accountability, safety and meeting the logistical needs for resources assigned to the incident.

“The team works with agency administrators to follow through and meet the goals and objectives for the event,” Laux said. “It brings some level or organization to what could be a chaotic situation. It accounts for every individual involved in the incident, from the firefighter or medical person on the ground on up. There’s somebody always keeping track of individuals and keeping things at a manageable level.”

At the TCF Center, the DNR team is headquartered in a concrete-floored convention space with folding walls. From the command center, they are on the phone and computers making sure that everything runs as smoothly as possible for staff and patients.

It’s a so-called “cold zone,” separated from anyone who has been exposed to the virus.

The care center already had been set up when the DNR team arrived, thanks to help from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Detroit District and from the Michigan National Guard.

Stepping in, the DNR’s incident management team’s first challenge was to provide stability and an operational structure for those already providing support to a growing team of health care providers.

“We needed to get all the agencies used to us being available and to make our presence known,” Mensch said. “Our job is to take the burdens off their shoulders. Every day we get a little more information and we are able to be more accurate and able to fit into this operation.”

That might mean delegating National Guard helpers to a supply crew, watching over cleaning crews and working with health care providers. The team’s shifts can last for up to 16 hours at a time.

Mensch hopes to have everything running as smoothly as possible before the team returns home.

“We’re taking it hour by hour and day by day, working with the organizational chart and making it work for this situation,” he said. “We’re on this team for a reason and we know how to make an organization work.”

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