



Department of Health

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Disaster Exercise to Safeguard Children Conducted in Putnam County; *Health Department, Emergency Services and Community Organizations* *Rehearse How to Serve the Needs of Youngest Residents*

BREWSTER, NY—Nearly 60 percent of Putnam households believe they would be reunited with their children within several hours of a major disaster. Yet history has proven otherwise: it took an astounding seven months to reunite the last child with family after Hurricane Katrina. This reality, and the fact that each day, nearly 20,000 children in Putnam County spend the majority of their day at a childcare facility or school, are the reasons behind the disaster preparedness exercise performed by Putnam County’s Community Resilience Coalition on Wednesday, May 3. More than 50 attendees from 28 organizations and agencies participated in the event which ran from 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Centennial Golf Club in Carmel.

“This exercise brings a deeper understanding of how our Putnam organizations and agencies interact during an emergency,” said County Executive MaryEllen Odell. “By providing an opportunity for our child-serving institutions to partner with local emergency responders, we improve communication and response to support and protect the children of our community.”

To better address the unique needs of children, the local Community Resilience Coalition (CRC), an official subcommittee of the longstanding Disaster Preparedness Task Force of Putnam County, conducted a discussion-based, “tabletop” exercise to test the assumptions, protocols and resources of child-serving institutions and key community stakeholders who may interact with children before, during, and after an emergency.

“The purpose of the exercise was to envision all the possibilities that could happen and then to decide how we, as community organizations, would handle it,” said Commissioner Anthony Sutton of the Bureau of Emergency Services of Putnam County. “By talking through the steps of a specified scenario, we identify where the gaps are and how best to fill them.” The scenario that was played out involved a major earthquake with direct damage in Putnam County, causing evacuation at some childcare and other essential facilities, and limiting availability of state and federal resources.

More than 65% of American households do not have an adequate emergency plan, and nearly half have none at all. Additionally, 45% of Putnam households believe help will arrive in under an hour in the event of a large-scale, unanticipated disaster, indicating a widespread sense of unrealistic expectations and false security. Furthermore in Putnam County, 41% of households are not familiar with their child's daycare or school evacuation and emergency plan. These statistics collectively support the notion that if disaster were to strike, many communities would be underprepared to protect children.

This exercise is a component of the national Resilient Children/Resilient Communities Initiative (RCRC), a partnership between the National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at Columbia University's Earth Institute and Save the Children (STC) funded by a grant from GSK. Putnam County is one of two pilot communities in the U.S. working on the RCRC Initiative.

The players in the exercise included representatives from schools, child care and after-school programs, law enforcement, public health and healthcare, emergency management and first responders, and other various government and community organizations.

“Strengthening the link between emergency management and child-serving institutions ultimately improves all emergency plans, in addition to sharpening our response and recovery action,” said interim Health Commissioner Michael J. Nesheiwat, MD.

Barbara Garbarino, project liaison for the CRC, who previously worked for the Child Care Council of Dutchess and Putnam, Inc., further explained that, “When childcare facilities are better prepared to take care of their children in an emergency, it not only frees responders to help others in need, but it also helps ensure children will recover more readily after the crisis. Children do best when their normal routines resume as quickly as possible.”

“An exercise like this better prepares local counties to anticipate and meet the unique needs of children,” said Jeff Schlegelmilch, deputy director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Earth Institute. “This is one of many activities of the Community Resilience Coalition that serves as a model for other communities looking to do this kind of work.”

The exercise scenario was collaboratively developed with input, advice, and assistance from a multi-agency exercise planning team. This exercise followed the guidance set forth by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and is compliant with Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) protocols and standards.

To learn more about Putnam's CRC, visit the web page:

<http://www.putnamcountyny.com/health/community-resilience-coalition/>.

About the Resilient Children/ Resilient Communities Initiative

The Resilient Children/Resilient Communities Initiative (RCRC) is funded by a grant from GSK and is led by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness in partnership with Save the Children. Launched in 2015, the three-year RCRC initiative has brought together local stakeholders in two pilot communities in New York and Arkansas to create emergency plans that meet the substantial needs of children in disasters. It has also established a national panel of experts to link the community work with preparedness priorities of communities throughout the United States. Learn more about the initiative here: <http://ncdp.columbia.edu/rcrc>

About Putnam County Department of Health (PCDOH)

The Department of Health's mission is to improve and protect the health of the Putnam County community, composed of nearly 100,000 residents. Core services include community health assessment, disease surveillance and control, emergency preparedness, environmental health protection, family health promotion and health education. For more information, please visit the PCDOH website at www.putnamcountyny.com/health or visit the social media sites on Facebook at www.facebook.com/putnamhealth, and Twitter @PutnamHealthNY.

About Putnam County Bureau of Emergency Services (BES)

The BES mission is to keep county residents safe from harm, by providing services to all fire, EMS and related emergency management initiatives. This includes training and equipping special teams for fire investigation, police response and hazardous materials mitigation, and a credible assessment team (CAT). Additionally, BES maintains a countywide communications system and continually seeks ways to improve response to both natural and manmade disasters. For more information, please visit the Bureau of Emergency Services website at <http://www.putnamcountyny.com/pcbcs>.

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