



LOCAL

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High school students prepare for disasters at camp

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In a summer rife with flooding and a week featuring two bomb scares Downtown, this week's youth disaster preparedness camp seems particularly timely.



John Maniaci - State Journal

UW Hospital Emergency Department nurse Dianna Bower leads a tour of a decontamination room inside the ER. Eighty-three students from around the state took part in a disaster preparedness camp in Madison, which included a visit to the hospital and the Med Flight center.

On Monday, 83 students and 12 adults arrived in Madison for a five-day session on responding to emergencies and disasters, increasing prevention efforts, and building leadership skills.

"We're also changing behaviors and attitudes of youth," said Mary Jean Erschen, executive director of the Center for School, Youth & Citizen Preparedness, which organizes the camp.

The skills taught at the Responding to Emergencies and Disasters with Youth camp apply regardless of the students' eventual career choice.

"I kind of want to be a teacher, and I just thought this is stuff you'll need to know anyway, just for everyday life," said Chloe Gulich, a sophomore at Lake Holcombe High School outside of Eau Claire.

Lake Holcombe teacher and FFA adviser Brian Guthman said the program has had an impact in his area.

"It's been a very good experience," he said. "Our kids have done things to help our town and our school get ready for response to emergency situations."

READY provides small stipends to participants every year and encourages them to complete a project in their community. Some students helped with flood relief, raising money through Red Cross, Erschen said.

Through a Homeland Security grant from the state Office of Justice Assistance, the Center for School, Youth and Citizen Preparedness launched the first READY Camp in 2005. The center has held four camps every summer since then, training nearly 800 youths for emergency and disaster situations at no cost to the students.

Because of federal budget cuts this year, however, READY had to drop three of the four planned camps this summer, and participants must now pay a fee of \$185.

Erschen said taxpayer support of the camp is a good use of money, but organizers are seeking nonprofit status and have received corporate donations from companies including Wal-Mart, Culver's, Chili's and Wendy's.