

Learning to get out of trouble

Firefighters participate in extrication exercise

BY ANDREW LARSON
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

PROSPECT — As cars become safer for occupants and technology improves, the dangers for emergency responders is higher than ever.

Hybrid cars, which can have 500 volts of electricity traveling through them, are one of the main concerns. Most firefighters don't have updated training on how to deal with the technology.

Seventy firefighters attended an extrication exercise Saturday at Prospect Volunteer Fire Department, sponsored by the Auto Body Association of Connecticut, to learn new techniques for dealing with a totaled vehicle.

"You have to treat every car as if it's a hybrid so you're protected," said Todd Hoffman, a nationally known expert and instructor on extrication. He spoke to the firefighters during a four-hour seminar in the morning, and guided them through hands-on simulations with seven cars later in the day.

The batteries in hybrids, often situated underneath the back seat, can electrocute a firefighter trying to save a crash victim's life unless it's properly disabled. Further, some hybrids have more than one battery and if mishandled can release toxic chemicals.

Cables under the cars carry a lethal amount of voltage, Hoffman said.

Also, he cautioned against cars with multiple airbags — some with as many as 12 — which can deploy during a rescue and injure or kill a victim or an emergency responder.

To deal with these issues, firefighters need a new set of tools and workarounds.

"You need to have a Plan B and a Plan C," Hoffman said. "Firefighters are trained for Plan A their whole lives, but for new cars those Plan A techniques don't work."

There is a desperate need for this type of training, Hoffman said, because most departments don't require firefighters to take refresher courses. Also,

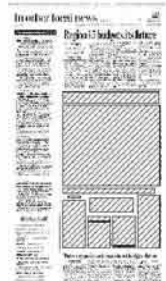
the number of crashes is on the rise because the weak economy is causing drivers to wait longer to service their cars, he said.

"It was so well received, it's not like it's a drag for them to go to another one of these," said Bob Skrip, president of the Auto Body Association of Connecticut. The trade organization plans to hold more exercises like the one in Prospect.

Firefighters from as far as East Hartford attended. They seemed to enjoy the simulation exercises, which allowed them to experiment with the information they had learned.

"What I took from it is a lot of shortcuts to get the victim out quicker and hopefully save lives," said James Iacoviello, a Wolcott volunteer firefighter.

He got the idea to use trimming shears — typically used on tree branches — as a means of cutting through glass quickly. Skrip said the Auto Body Association of Connecticut promotes safety among drivers and first responders.



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Firefighters experiment with new tools on a mangled Honda Accord during an extrication exercise Saturday afternoon in Prospect. The training session, sponsored by the Auto Body Association of Connecticut, taught firefighters the latest extrication techniques.