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Emergency Response Test Runs Smoothly

The Invercargill Fire Service and PowerNet joined forces in a joint exercise this week (Monday 16 May) to test their combined response to a medical emergency in an underground substation.

Neil Ladbrook, Invercargill Fire Service, Senior Station Officer, said the confined space rescue exercise was a great opportunity to test equipment in what is called a Level 2 line rescue response.

“We often have situations where we rescue people above ground but this was a good opportunity to test our systems and response to a below ground rescue, which involved lowering Fire Service staff through a maintenance hole to effect a rescue in a confined space.”

In the exercise scenario, a PowerNet staff member working at an underground substation suffered a medical event and needed to be evacuated from an underground substation, accessed through a maintenance hole located in the Herbert Street centre strip.

As part of the exercise, the Fire Service lowered a Stokes basket (a stretcher that can be used in confined spaces where a person is strapped into the basket and immobilised to prevent further injury) was lowered into the underground substation and used to hoist the ‘injured’ person back to ground level.

Two Fire appliances attended as part of the exercise. While in a real situation St John Ambulance and Police would also be present, the exercise was to particularly test initial and immediate response procedures.

A key consideration in these kinds of rescues is the limited size of underground substations which restrict the ability for people to move around and also limits the ability to manoeuvre equipment, says Mr Ladbrook.

“It was a good substation to undertake the rescue exercise, the limited space down there was only about five metres by four meters most of which was taken up with the electrical equipment including a large transformer and associated switchgear,” he said.

For PowerNet, the exercise was important and extremely useful in testing its emergency planning.

“The health and safety of our staff is paramount so we regularly conduct exercises for staff so they’re aware of the procedures to follow and better prepared if an emergency situation unfolds,” says Phil Johnson, PowerNet Field Safety and Training Advisor.

“In this scenario, our role was to initiate a rescue response with the Fire Service and for the two uninjured staff on site to practice a first-aid response and their interactions with the Fire Service,” he said.

“While we are progressively shifting our 11 underground substations above ground over the next three years in Invercargill and putting in more modern equipment, historically the city

has one of the oldest underground networks in the country. Although it's extremely rare to initiate an emergency response as a result of an incident occurring in an underground substation – I've not known it to occur in my 30 years in the electricity sector – it's still very important that we practice the response procedure and understand what needs to be done."

As it was necessary to shut down one transformer for a short time during the exercise to isolate the electricity, PowerNet and the Fire Service would like to thank the customers affected by the power outage, all of whom had been notified prior to the exercise.

"We apologise for any inconvenience this may have caused. However, for our staff safety it is really important that we run through these procedures so we are best prepared if a real emergency situation occurs," Mr Johnson said.

It was also necessary to put a traffic management plan in place to allow traffic to continue to move through the area of Herbert and Carron Streets while the exercise took place.

"We'd also like to thank those motorists who were travelling through the area around the time the exercise was underway for their patience," he said.

ENDS

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