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(September 23, 2010)-- The Army Physical Fitness and Research Institute building is back in operation after a small mercury spill last week forced the building to be shut down until hazmat cleaning crews could clean the site.

"We have the all clear and the Carlisle Barracks Safety Office and [Directorate of Public Works] did a wonderful job with the hazmat cleaning," explained Dr. Thomas Williams, director of APFRI. "They did readings of the building 48 hours after the spill and they have given us the all clear so we have resumed normal operations."

A host of regulations and policies exist to protect us from the potential for harm, no matter how small.

On Sept. 22, a mercury leak from a blood pressure machine at the APFRI assessment center put those policies and the Carlisle Barracks fire fighters to the job they train and plan for: protection from hazardous materials ... to include the mercury in a blood pressure machine.

"If you have a hazardous material spill on post, call the post police or firefighters to alert first responders, or call 911," said Barry Farquhar, director of Carlisle Barracks Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobility and Security. "If the spill looks like it is going to go down a drain or spread, try to block its path with something that can be taken away with the rest of the spill once first responders arrive, however, do not touch the material."

With the swift response from Carlisle Barracks Fire Department and emergency response teams in full action, the matter was rapidly addressed.

Photo by Staff Sgt. Corey Baltos, Army War College Public Affairs.

Firefighters donned hazmat suits to assess the situation, while APFRI personnel awaited outside. Then, Fire Chief Jim O'Connell advised a two-step plan to fully meet federal



regulations. Post environmental management coordinator Donna Swauger confirmed that the plan follows EPA recommendations.



"The building will reopen, however the affected area is sealed off until the area is cleaned," O'Connell said.

"Today, APFRI personnel were assessing students from the Marine Corps War College, up from Quantico, Va. for senior leader assessments, when a blood pressure machine leaked a small amount of mercury," explained Williams. "The amount was less than a teaspoon, similar to what you would find in a meat thermometer in your kitchen. We were uncertain of the dispersment of the material, so we took careful and prudent steps to evacuate everyone from the building, and then contacted emergency services who contained the area in a very rapid and professional manner."

First, the firefighters ensured the air was free of hazard. The installation coordinated with Cumberland County 911 Center for a local fire company support with specialized mercury vapor analyzer.

Meanwhile, fire fighters sealed with plastic the part of the building where the break occurred.

"Hazardous material incidents are very rare here on Carlisle Barracks, so I was pleased to note the excellent and professional response to the mercury spill. Immediately we had our police and fire department on scene and our hazardous materials experts in place," said Lt. Col. Janet Holliday, garrison commander for Carlisle Barracks. "We quickly coordinated with the county hazmat personnel and cooperation between our departments was excellent, minimizing the potentially dangerous effects of this incident."