

Locals deploy to Galveston for relief effort

By Kym Soper – Journal Inquirer

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Michael J. Purcaro, Vernon's Office of Emergency Management director and a volunteer with the federally deployed CT-1 Disaster Medical Assistance Team, is one of about 20 state residents in Texas offering aid to those affected by Hurricane Ike.

The debris field makes Galveston, Texas, a barrier island community of 60,000, look like a war zone, but even worse is the smell, says Michael J. Purcaro, a Vernon resident deployed to Galveston Island for medical support.

The slender strip of land was the worst hit when Hurricane Ike barreled into southeast Texas last week, killing 53.

“It's total devastation here,” said Purcaro in a phone interview Thursday after scant cell phone service had been restored to the area. “But the worst is that there's a very stagnant, putrid smell from the rotting carcasses of household pets and backed-up sewage that permeates the area.”

Purcaro, who is director of Vernon's Office of Emergency Management, is a volunteer with the CT-1 Disaster Medical Assistance Team, a federal rapid response team of about 20 Connecticut doctors, nurses, and paramedics who are the first on the scene providing critical medical service in response to natural or man-made disasters.

The team deployed to a staging area in Atlanta on Sept. 5, and arrived on the island Sunday as soon as winds allowed for safe helicopter landing. They and their teammates from Rhode Island are helping local, federal, and state officials provide the only emergency medical care available to the inhabitants.

Thousands defied warning

Roughly 15,000 Galveston Island residents defied forecasters' warning of "certain death" to ride out the storm, and many remain there despite the repeated urgings of officials — worried about threats that include mosquito-borne disease — to get out.

Those who did evacuate before the storm were allowed to return home briefly Thursday and view the damage to their homes and business. But authorities pleaded for at least another week before they returned home for good to allow crews to repair the city's infrastructure.

As of Thursday, some cell phone service had been restored, and many of the city's services — including water, sewer, and power — are recovering, but remain several days away from being fully powered up, officials say.

There's no sewage system in place, and no fresh water or refrigeration; some looting is occurring, Purcaro said.

"But there's a very strong local, state, and federal law enforcement presence, and they're constantly patrolling the streets," he said.



The electricity, however, is another matter.

It's going to take weeks before power is restored to the entire island, Purcaro predicted.

The island's only hospital, where Purcaro's team is based, was still running on generators Thursday, keeping just the emergency room running.

"We've done a lot of treat and release, but we can't keep anyone here overnight because most of the hospital is in the dark," Purcaro said.

Medics keeping busy

Purcaro says about 200 patients are being treated a day for minor bumps and bruises, and the team is sewing a lot of stitches and injecting quite a few tetanus shots. They've also seen plenty of traumatic injuries from debris and burns, he said.

After being flooded by the storm surge, gas leaks caused a number of houses to explode.

"All we can do right now is stabilize and medevac (seriously injured patients) on two helicopters and 12 ambulances from all over the country that have arrived here to help," Purcaro said, adding: "It looks like a MASH unit — every 20 to 30 minutes helicopters are taking off and transporting patients to us or to other hospitals for more advanced care."

Morale among the volunteer staff is high, even with hectic, 12- to 15-hour shifts and sleeping in tents.

"About 3 to 5 hours of sleep is a luxury," he said. And until recently, bathing and toilets were practically non-existent.

For showers there were baby wipes, and for a latrine volunteers were given a bag and a pop-up tent.

"It was a major morale booster when the port-a-potties were delivered the other day," he said with a chuckle.

Deployment is typically two weeks in duration, and the local team, which includes Marge Lietia, Eastern Connecticut Health Network emergency management services coordinator for Manchester and Vernon, expects to come home Monday. Teams from other states will replace them and work until the area can sustain itself.

For now, "we're treating folks rescued from rooftops and from house fires, where often the only choice is to burn or jump into water filled with debris," he said.

But residents are grateful the team is there to help, Purcaro said.

"Everywhere we go we get hugs and people crying on our shoulders — it's much different here than it was for Katrina," which in 2005 devastated New Orleans and other parts of the Gulf Coast, causing hundreds of deaths and billions of dollars in damage.

Relief efforts then were slow to arrive, and those who had stayed behind were angry at the first responders until they found out they weren't from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

One Galveston Island resident, Michael Fox, left an impression on Purcaro.

“Life is difficult”

When the two met, Fox told Purcaro that the storm took his job and his home.

“Life is difficult,” Purcaro said of Fox’s plight. “He spends most of his day going to government points of distribution, getting food, water, and ice, but there’s nothing to do in town, and the island is like a ghost town — this once very vibrant and active area — and it’s brought a great deal of sorrow to his heart.”



Besides losing their community, residents are dealing with a whole host of issues, including dehydration, and are overwhelmed by psychological trauma, he said.

While his team can easily patch broken bones and stitch up wounds, some of the mental health issues they’re seeing will take longer to heal.

Purcaro said he and the team members are frequently asked why they do this type of work.

“There is nothing more personally and professionally gratifying than to be here volunteering — even though you’re away from your family and friends and comfort — during this national time of need,” he said, adding: “There’s nothing more American.”

Anyone wanting to help with relief efforts can connect with the local chapter of the American Red Cross at 678-2796, or visit the Web page: <http://CharterOak.RedCross.org>

To become a member of the Disaster Medical Assistance Team, call 509-7975.

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