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## Town first to hook into satellite radio system for disaster contingency

*By: Kym Soper, Journal Inquirer*

**VERNON** - The town is the first in the state to be hooked up to a federal satellite radio system geared for improving communications during a natural or man-made disaster, local officials say.

The national Satellite Mutual Aid Radio Talkgroup, known as the SMART system, allows local public safety officials to have a direct, secure line to the U.S. Justice Department, FBI, and other municipalities that subscribe, Michael J. Purcaro, director of Vernon's Office of Emergency Management, said.

The "push-to-talk" two-way radio, which will be kept at the public safety building on West Street, will be useful when other forms of communication are not working, officials say. This was a huge problem for rescue crews during the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on New York City and when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

In disasters of all kinds, telephone lines and communication cell towers often are knocked out, Purcaro said. The SMART phone doesn't depend on landlines, however, as it bounces a signal directly to a satellite orbiting the earth and back down again directly to the federal government, he said. But it's more than just picking up the phone to chat with the FBI, Purcaro said. The system also allows subscribers to talk or monitor situations in neighboring towns, which means they can coordinate assistance more effectively when, for example, a hurricane hits the shoreline, Purcaro said.

In Connecticut, only Vernon and the state Public Health Department are enrolled in the program, but it's expected towns and cities across the country will be on board soon, officials say. "Satellite phones are definitely becoming more commonplace," said Purcaro, who noted that the town already is hooked up with a direct dial satellite phone to state agencies dealing with emergency management.

"We're the first town in the state to have this capability to connect to the federal government directly, however," he said. The radio was purchased for \$3,500, and funded with a state Homeland Security grant administered by the Capitol Regional Council of Governments.

Established in August 2007, the federal satellite communications network is constantly monitored by the FBI and currently encompasses the entire continental United States, Alaska, Hawaii, and the Caribbean. Municipalities need federal authorization to be hooked into the system, and Vernon is the state's pioneer primarily because it was the first to file the necessary paperwork, Purcaro said.

The system will "enhance the ability of our first-responders to communicate and coordinate quickly and effectively in times of urgent need, regardless of location and infrastructure," Mayor Jason L. McCoy said.

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