

OEM BOSS TAKES PART IN FLU DRILL

BY STEVE SMITH

Before the H1N1 scare, Vernon's Emergency Management Director, Michael Purcaro, took part in a recent preparedness drill that included emergency services teams from across the country, put on by the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

In April, a team of 21 from the Connecticut Disaster Medical Assistance Team was flown to the Department of Homeland Security's Noble Training Facility in Fort McClellan, Ala., where they met with teams from such places as Texas, Illinois and Kentucky.

As soon as they hit the ground, the teams were told of the mock scenario—a foreign plane full of people and their pets, that became ill with influenza-like symptoms in transit, lands in the U.S. The teams had to figure out a command structure, security, medical triage personnel, and all of the logistics of a mobile field hospital. Local nursing students volunteered, playing the 50 victims, who, based on their assessment, had to be treated, isolated, or quarantined.

"It raises a lot of logistical and difficult questions," Purcaro said. "The ones we haven't seen exercised much in many years are isolation and quarantine. Those are tough issues." Purcaro said the pets were another entire layer of difficulty, requiring a veterinary response unit. "We had to deal with some real world elements," he said. "We had the threat of a tornado. We were monitoring rain, and wind, to ensure the personal safety of our personnel."

The team was thrown curve balls, like a group of media photographers, who had come into the hospital to document the goings-on, only to become infected themselves, then spreading the contagion and exposing the medical personnel. "Actual doctors had to be taken out of play, and put into quarantine," Purcaro said. There were also people who presented with language barriers, or with mental changes like confusion or disorientation, and some pretended to be violent.

Purcaro said that lessons were certainly learned. "The training itself was good from a network standpoint—getting to know the other teams and how they operate... was extremely valuable," he said, adding that keeping people and their pets in communication, while each was being isolated or treated, was a series of lessons well-learned. Educating the patients of the necessity of the separation from the animals was crucial to the order of the operations.

As for the country's preparedness level in the case of an actual similar event, Purcaro said the exercise improved upon the plans already in place. "I believe we would be able to respond as a country," he said, "and certainly as a team in Connecticut." He added that Connecticut, unlike some states, has its own 100-bed, level-1 trauma field hospital that could be deployed anywhere in the state.

"It was very unique," Purcaro said. "It's definitely going to be a part of the writing of the book of the national response plan, and exercising part of it."

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VERNON

OEM boss takes part in flu drill

By STEVE SMITH
Staff Writer

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Emergency workers from around the country were part of the exercise, and were required to wear protective equipment.



Vernon's Emergency Management Director Michael Purcaro at the facility in Alabama. Photos courtesy of Michael Purcaro.

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As for the country's preparedness

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