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## A Year On The Firing Line Director Emerges In Emergency Services

By *MONICA POLANCO*  
*Courant Staff Writer*

**VERNON** -- Heavy rains had inundated the bridge leading out of the Quality Inn, where more than 100 guests were staying.

There was no way in, and no way out.

"It looked like a class 3 rapids," said Michael Purcaro, town emergency management director.

The guests could have stayed inside until the flooding - triggered by heavy rain in October - subsided, but emergency crews wouldn't have been able to reach the inn if someone inside needed help.

Leaving for higher ground was too dangerous.

"We didn't want anyone to get swept away trying to cross the bridge," Purcaro said.

Vernon police officers, state troopers and Manchester police officers, firefighters and public works employees were brought in.

They bulldozed part of a fence and built a temporary ramp to I-84 to evacuate the stranded hotel guests. It was one of several flood-related calls that night.

"That's a real good example of what emergency management does," said Purcaro, 33. "The first response I got was, 'You can't do that.' (But) you never hesitate to respond."

It was one of the challenges Purcaro faced during his first year as Vernon's emergency management director.

Purcaro, section chief of contracts and grants management for the Connecticut Department of Public Health, traveled an indirect path to the part-time town position.



*Michael J. Purcaro, MS, PT*  
*Vernon's Emergency Management Director*

He had recently moved to Vernon in 2004 and wanted to volunteer as a firefighter when he learned about the emergency management job, which carries a \$10,000 salary.

"I think it's important to be engaged in the community in which you live," he said.

He was hired last December, replacing Anthony Patrizz Jr., who sued the town, claiming he was unfairly fired in 2003 as the assistant fire chief and unfairly suspended from his jobs in 2004 as fire marshal and emergency management director.

His public-safety experience includes serving as the public information officer for the state's Disaster Medical Assistance Team, which offers statewide and national support during federal or state disasters, and as a national trainer in emergency risk communications for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

So far, Purcaro has helped secure a roughly \$183,000 federal grant for the town. The money will be used to install ventilation systems at two firehouses and to buy custom-fit safety gear for volunteer firefighters and two all-terrain vehicles for deep-woods rescues.

He also implemented a notification system called the Wide Area Notification System. The Internet-based system notifies emergency responders when the emergency operation center is opened and keeps a record of who received and responded to the message, Purcaro said.

The system eliminates the need to call people individually, which can be problematic and time consuming. The system can also be used for other purposes, such as notifying school principals of weather-related closures or delays.

Purcaro also has implemented a system that gives emergency responders priority to telephone land lines during an emergency.

Town Administrator Larry Shaffer described Purcaro as a consummate professional.

"I think his strongest characteristic is his deep sense of commitment that he brings to the tasks," Shaffer said. "He understands completely, in my estimation, the importance of communication and team work and I've been very impressed with his ability to bring many important tasks together in a coordinated fashion."

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