

Local Responder's Efforts Praised in Response to Chester Fatality

For the President of the Vermont Chapter of the International Association of Arson Investigators the phrase "Every man goes home" has real meaning. On the evening of March 7, Vermont State Police Sgt. Thomas Williams responded to a scene that had both horrific results and a reminder of who we are as first responders. A seven-year-old boy had been swept into a bridge culvert filled full of raging storm runoff in a waterway in Chester.

The youngster was wedged under the water between ice and rocks in the freezing waters. Upon arrival at the scene Williams was advised by former Chester Fire Chief Jeff Holden that a Chester Police Officer, Paul Larochelle was in the waterway with a neighbor of the trapped boy. Bob Turco was trying to free the youngster. They were clung to a rock ledge. Williams was advised by another officer that Larochelle was tied to a rope but due to severe hypothermia was unable at that time to assist in either his rescue or that of the victim. Sgt. Williams removed his duty gun belt and entered the water. The victim had been submerged for an extended time period and was in full arrest. None of the rescuers had any rescue gear or equipment.

Williams, Turco, and Holden were able to free the wedged victim and bring him to the shore. He was taken to a local hospital and airlifted to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center and then flown to Boston Children's Hospital. He succumbed to his injuries about 11-1/2 hours after the incident.

Sgt. Williams and Officer Larochelle were treated along with another civilian for hypothermia. Williams was also treated for injuries to nerve injuries to his hand.

Sgt. Williams is also a call firefighter/EMT with the Springfield Fire Department and a trained swift water rescue specialist. His actions and those of Chester Police Office Larochelle, Jeff Holden, and Bob Turco were able to insure that there was only one fatality. While the youngster died 11-plus hours later Williams commented, "At least his family had some hope and time to say goodbye to him."

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