

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Are we really ready?

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, countries around the world were hit by natural disasters that took hundreds of thousands of innocent lives, leaving entire regions devastated and lives forever changed. The lack of early warning, planning, communications, and medical relief evident in all these major disasters led to the unnecessary loss of life and devastation to property and the environment. Citizens and governments, complacent about emergency planning, were unprepared to effectively help themselves or provide emergency assistance to those in need.

These scenes were broadcast night after night, not only from the poorer countries of the world but from the richest and most advanced country, the United State of America. Citizens questioned, “How can this be happening? Where are the firemen, the police, and my government? If I need medical help, where do I go?”

Citizens were stunned to see that political leaders, government officials, and relief organizations were unprepared for and overwhelmed by these events. In almost all cases, emergency planning, training, public information, sheltering, and relief efforts lacked direction and coordination, resulting in the tragedy of events we all witnessed unfold on television.

Over the years, Santa Barbara County and its citizens have experienced major earthquakes, landslides, fires, floods, and other life- and property-threatening disasters, all of which can occur again at any time. The United States Geological survey ranks the Santa Barbara area third in the United States, behind Los Angeles and San Francisco, for having significant seismic potential.

In early August of 2005, the Grand Jury launched an inquiry into emergency preparedness, looking at four specific areas of emergency response:

1. Santa Barbara County Emergency Operations Center – the coordination of the emergency response
2. Emergency Public Information – how we are informed
3. Emergency Sheltering – assisting those displaced
4. Emergency Medical Response – helping those in need of medical assistance

Disaster Preparedness

The Grand Jury examined each of these areas of emergency preparation and response and developed recommendations to improve the County's ability to deliver essential emergency services in a timely manner. The following reports explain the roles and responsibilities of each of these functions in providing our citizens with the emergency services that are so vital to their safety and critical to our County's ability to coordinate and manage a major disaster.