

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Further Improvement Needed

SUMMARY

There are few issues which affect everyone in Santa Barbara County as directly as emergency communications. When there is an emergency, information needs to be accurate, available and updated regularly. Information should come from many different sources and be available to the entire County, not limited to either the north or south.

There were significant improvements in communication between the time of the Gap Fire and the Tea Fire. Recommendations in this report are designed to further improve communications, and are not meant to detract from the excellent performance of many people in the County, including all safety personnel and workers in both the Emergency Operations Center (EOC)¹ and the Joint Information Center (JIC).

A JIC should be set up immediately when an emergency starts, and no later than when the EOC is activated. There was no JIC for the Gap Fire, and one was not in operation for 21 hours after the Tea Fire began. The *Santa Barbara Independent* and the City of Goleta both have initiated an e-mail based alert to notify their subscribers and provide updates when there are emergencies. Such a service is a tremendous benefit in keeping residents fully informed. The County of Santa Barbara provides no such service. The 2008-2009 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury determined it is not adequate to rely on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the County and 11 radio stations to disseminate information. The Jury believes this issue should be reevaluated by including County-wide radio stations.

This report will address several of these communication areas, with specific recommendations for each. These recommendations are not all-inclusive. The County must continue to take the initiative to research and seek out other forms of communication to ensure that local residents are informed in an emergency.

BACKGROUND

In any emergency it is critical that the public be informed regularly. The information has to be current, available and it has to be accurate. The public needs to know where to obtain and how to quickly access information. The citizens of Santa Barbara County are fortunate to have local media coverage during an emergency. KEYT television and

¹ Definitions for terms can be found in the Glossary at the end of this report.

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various radio stations broadcast continual coverage of the Tea Fire. Even professional safety personnel watched KEYT to receive current information about the fire.

In an emergency, the first senior person on the scene becomes the Incident Commander. It is this person's responsibility to notify key people in the County the type and location of an emergency. The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) can then be activated by any of the following: the County Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or Assistant CEO, the Director of the Office of Emergency Services (OES), the Sheriff or the Fire Chief. The EOC currently is housed in modular buildings which are primarily used as the County Employee University. Since the EOC is not dedicated and is used for other purposes, activation takes two to three hours. When in operation, the EOC coordinates all affected departments, including communications.

The 2008-2009 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury was able to observe the effectiveness of County communications during two emergencies: the Gap and Tea Fires. Communications in the Gap Fire were seriously deficient. The public received contradictory information, and the information and maps were frequently dated. When the Tea Fire started in November, it was clear that the County had focused on correcting some of the earlier problems. Once the Emergency Operating Center (EOC) was activated, information during the fire was current and was immediately put on the County website. There were frequent press releases, and maps were largely accurate and available on-line. Nevertheless problems persisted.

METHODOLOGY

In conducting its investigation, the Grand Jury interviewed the following:

- Senior officials in both the Fire and Sheriff's Departments
- Public Information Officers (PIOs) from the following departments:
 - Sheriff's Department
 - County Fire Department
 - Santa Barbara County
 - City of Goleta
- Officials from the City of Goleta
- Director of the OES
- Santa Barbara County Chief Executive Officer and Assistant Chief Executive Officer
- Several people from the media, including a television announcer, radio engineer and former radio station owner
- Leaders of the Emergency Public Information Center (EPIC)
- Two County supervisors who were directly involved in the two fires
- OES Director, San Luis Obispo County
- Program Administrator for the Ventura OES

In addition, the Grand Jury visited the following sites:

- The Santa Barbara County EOC during the first full day of

the Tea Fire

- The Joint Information Center (JIC) during the Tea Fire
- The Ventura County EOC
- The Sheriff's Department Operations Center (DOC) and one of its Command vehicles
- Sheriff's Communication Center

While the Grand Jury had the opportunity to observe the effectiveness of communications during the two fires, the investigation of the Jury was not restricted to fires, but all types of emergencies.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The Grand Jury recognizes the effort that was undertaken to improve communications after the Gap Fire. By the time of the Tea Fire, more effort was made to keep the County's Channel 20 and its website current, and a JIC was activated. As with all emergency efforts, special recognition must be given to the Fire and Sheriff's Departments for their hard work and efficiency in ensuring that information communicated to the public was accurate and current. The above notwithstanding, the Jury found areas where the County can and should improve emergency communications.

Emergencies can take place anywhere in the County. The County could be divided in the event of a major emergency such as an earthquake that closes Highway 101 and/or San Marcos Pass. A variety of emergencies could isolate sections of the County. Citizens need to know where an emergency has taken place, and what they need to do. An emergency brings up a myriad of urgent questions. Should I pack my belongings? Should I be prepared to evacuate? Where do I take my animals? Are there shelters, and if so, where are they? Where will medical care be provided?

Citizens need to know where and how to obtain emergency information quickly. They have no time to search radio stations to obtain current emergency information while they are packing belongings, gathering children and herding animals. The information must be accurate and not contradictory.

No one method of communication is adequate. Electricity may be out, so televisions, radios and computers may not be usable. Battery operated radios may be one way to receive information. Kiosks throughout an affected area may be another way to receive updates. Websites must be continually updated and easily located by all citizens. There is a system designated Reverse 911® which allows officials to alert the public by telephone in an emergency. However, this system may not work for all areas, and each home may not have a telephone which will receive a Reverse 911® call when electrical power is unavailable.

This report will address several of these communication areas, with specific recommendations for each.

Radio Communications

In response to a report by the 2005-2006 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury, the County CEO stated: “There is no single radio station that will provide coverage for the entire geographical boundaries of the County.” Based on this mistaken belief, the County chose to work with multiple radio stations rather than develop a single source of information.

In early 2007, the County entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with four AM and seven FM radio stations. This MOU recognized the role the County and the radio stations have in providing continual emergency communications. While the MOU requires both parties to cooperate, it does not specify how or when the radio stations will transmit information. A pertinent paragraph from the MOU is as follows:

The MOU participants agree to broadcast the County’s emergency public information to its listeners on a regular basis throughout the duration of the emergency. It is the responsibility of each of the MOU radio station participants to determine a regular broadcast schedule and repetition for the county-provided emergency public information, which could include, but is not limited to, the pre-empting of regularly scheduled programming as determined appropriate by the MOU participants.

Nowhere does the MOU state when broadcasts will take place, as that is left up to individual stations. Furthermore, none of these stations covers the entire County, so one station might cover Santa Barbara, while another would cover Santa Maria.

Following the Gap Fire in July, 2008, the Board of Supervisors asked the County CEO to look into the feasibility of the County’s owning and operating a single radio station for the purpose of distributing emergency news and information. In its September 16, 2008 written response to this request, the CEO and Office of Emergency Services (OES) pointed out the obligation of the County to cover its entire area in an emergency. They also pointed out the exorbitant costs involved in purchasing and then maintaining a station. They then went on to state:

It is important to note that the physical size and mountainous topography of Santa Barbara County makes it impossible to have a single radio station that would serve the entire county. Thus, a comprehensive government-owned and operated radio station network serving the majority of the county’s population in the operational area would require, at a minimum, two, possible three, commercial-grade AM or FM stations.

The Grand Jury has determined that this statement is incorrect.

KRUZ-FM (97.5) and KVYB-FM (103.3) both cover the entire County. In fact they cover more than just Santa Barbara County, and extend into both Ventura and San Luis Obispo Counties. KRUZ and KVYB are both located on hardened sites on Broadcast

Peak. Neither station has signed the MOU. In addition, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that KUSC was negotiating to purchase an FM station in Santa Maria. When finalized, KUSC also would cover the entire County, plus Los Angeles, Ventura and Palm Springs.

The Grand Jury agrees that the cost of acquiring a radio station would be prohibitive; however, the County could buy time on one or both of these stations, to be used only in emergencies. The length of time of the broadcast could be limited to one or two minutes, and be pre-scheduled to be broadcast at set times. The cost would be minimal compared to purchasing a station. The County would have control over the message, the public would know where and when it could receive emergency information, and the entire County would be covered. Rather than searching among 11 stations with no knowledge of when information will be broadcast, residents could access a single source at specific times.

Emergency Alert System (EAS)

Formerly known as the Emergency Broadcast System, the EAS is mandated by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) to allow the President of the United States to communicate with the public in the event of a national emergency. Certain local agencies also can activate the EAS. According to the Santa Barbara County Emergency Alert System Plan, these agencies are the National Weather Service, the Office of Emergency Services and authorized public officials of the incorporated cities of Santa Barbara County.

Each radio station broadcasts the EAS message. The stations have the right to delay the message up to 15 minutes to fit with local broadcasts, but most choose to relay it without delay. EAS can also be used for television, where the message scrolls across the screen.

The EAS is not designed to be used as a press release. It is strictly to be used to describe an emergency. So, for example, it could describe areas of mandatory evacuation, or provide an emergency broadcast of a dam break or chemical spills. EAS also can be localized, so that the broadcast could be limited to certain areas in the County.

The activation of the EAS to announce mandatory evacuations in the Gap and Tea Fires would have been one more method of direct communication for the public.

Joint Information Center (JIC)

According to the Santa Barbara County's Emergency Operations Plan², one of the EOC's responsibilities is to provide information and instructions to the public. This dissemination is best done through a JIC, activated immediately after the emergency has been detected. In the past, it has not been an integral part of emergency operations. Its

² The official name of the document detailing the EOC operation is *Santa Barbara Operational Area Emergency Operations Center (EOC)*.

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establishment was delayed by one day in the Tea Fire. The JIC will increase the public's confidence in emergency communication, and it will decrease the risk that inaccurate information will be distributed to the public. The County Public Information Officer (PIO) should be present and in charge of the JIC.

A JIC is designed to provide timely, accurate and complete emergency information to the public. It is composed of a group of PIOs from local, state, federal and private organizations who handle public information needs during an emergency. They meet as a group, and jointly issue press releases. The JIC should integrate easily with the Incident Commander and the EOC, and the members of the JIC can be adjusted to meet the needs of any emergency. Key members of the JIC in one emergency may not be the key members in another. The existence of a JIC may make the difference between the public perceiving an incident to be under control or out of control.

If the PIOs are working jointly, there is instant and regular communication between them and chances of contradictory information being passed to the public are greatly reduced. If a key PIO operates independently he may very well not receive timely information from other PIOs.

In the Gap Fire there was no JIC and information was contradictory, frequently inaccurate and often out-of-date. The public widely complained about the lack of good communication. In the Tea Fire a JIC was established and staffed by multiple agencies. The JIC issued press releases which were broadcast and which appeared regularly on the County website. Regrettably, however, the JIC was not set up until late Friday afternoon, 21 hours after the Tea Fire started. When the Jury visited the JIC, representatives were present from the Fire and Sheriff's Departments, Cal Fire, the United States Forest Service, and the County. Other agencies may have arrived after Jury members left.

E-Mail Alerts to the Public

During the Gap Fire, the *Santa Barbara Independent* website had the most current and accurate updates. It was the first to indicate who should be evacuated, and it was the first to describe who could return home. Following the Gap Fire, the *Independent* set up its *IndyAlert*, which describes emergencies and provides local information to subscribers by e-mail. There is no cost to the subscriber. It is effective and works well. The City of Goleta also set up the *Goleta City Alert* for its residents to notify subscribers by e-mail.

These alerts are not expensive to set up. They guarantee instant messaging, and can be picked up by Internet-capable cell phones as easily as computers. They add to the information being sent out by radio and the press, and insure subscribers receive current information. They could be sent out countywide, or to specific areas which might be affected by the emergency. While the Grand Jury recognizes what the *Independent* and the City of Goleta have done, the County currently does not have such a system.

Reverse 911®

The Sheriff's Communication Center issues Reverse 911® calls. These calls are automated messages from the Sheriff's Department to notify residents about mandatory evacuations or other emergencies. For the residents who received Reverse 911® calls during the two fires, these messages were invaluable. There was no confusion about what they needed to do, and that it had to take place immediately. The Jury was told the Reverse 911® system currently accesses less than 20% of the population and communicates only in English.

The Sheriff's Department recommends that each homeowner have at least one phone which is hooked directly into a phone jack, because some phones will not operate without electricity. Cell phone users may register their phones with the Sheriff's Department (<http://www.sbsheriff.org/>), so they could be notified as well.

CONCLUSION

It is critical to have multiple forms of emergency communication as any one form may not work. Electricity may not be available or earthquake damage might destroy communication towers, but the public still needs to be informed with current, accurate information. Communication may be improved through management, such as the use of a JIC, or may be enhanced through technology, such as better use of radios and improving Reverse 911®. As an additional tool, the EAS can be used to disseminate information more widely to residents.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1a

Contrary to statements by the County CEO and the Office of Emergency Services, there are two radio stations that cover the entire County.

Finding 1b

The County has not established specific airtimes with any radio station to air emergency broadcasts.

Recommendation 1

That the County negotiate a purchase of airtime with a countywide radio station to broadcast emergency messages at specific times.

Finding 2

The County did not activate the Emergency Alert System in either the Gap or Tea Fires to notify the public about mandatory evacuations.

Recommendation 2

That the Office of Emergency Services activate the Emergency Alert System in accordance with the Santa Barbara County Emergency Alert System Plan.

Finding 3

There was no Joint Information Center during the course of the Gap Fire. The Joint Information Center was not set up until 21 hours after the start of the Tea Fire.

Recommendation 3

When an Emergency Operating Center is set up, the Joint Information Center should be activated immediately.

Finding 4

In an emergency, the *Santa Barbara Independent* and the City of Goleta send out e-mail alerts to their subscribers. The County of Santa Barbara has not set up a similar alert system.

Recommendation 4

That the County develop an e-mail alert system which would cover all residents in the County.

Finding 5

The Reverse 911® system can be an effective method of notifying residents. However, it has had limited coverage in the County, communications are limited to English and many homeowners may not receive messages for a variety of reasons.

Recommendation 5a

That the Sheriff's Department inform and educate all County residents about the Reverse 911® system.

Recommendation 5b

That the Sheriff's Department monitor and improve the Reverse 911® system to reach all residents, including those who are Spanish speaking.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

In accordance with *California Penal Code, Section 933.05* each agency and government body affected by or named in this report is requested to respond in writing to the findings and recommendations in a timely manner. The following are the affected agencies for this report, with the mandated response period for each:

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors – 90 days

Finding	1a, 1b
Recommendation	1

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Santa Barbara County Executive Officer – 60 days

Findings 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4
Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4

Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services – 60 days

Findings 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4
Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4

Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department – 60 days

Finding 3, 5
Recommendation 3, 5a, 5b

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Emergency Alert System (EAS)

This is a Federal Communication Commission (FCC) mandated program to allow the President of the United States to communicate with the public in a national emergency. However, it has provisions to allow local activation. In Santa Barbara County, the National Weather Service and the Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services (OES) are the primary agencies that can activate the system. City OES offices can access the program through the County OES.

Emergency Operations Center (EOC)

This is a central command and control facility responsible for carrying out the principles of emergency preparedness and emergency management. An EOC is responsible for the strategic overview of the disaster and to provide logistics support.

Incident Commander

The Incident Commander is responsible for the overall management of an emergency.

Joint Information Center (JIC)

This is a temporary organization established during emergencies to provide response agencies with a means to pool communication resources and ensure that consistent and accurate information is released as quickly as possible to the general public and news media.

Office of Emergency Services (OES)

This office is active year round, not only in emergencies. The Director reports directly to the County CEO. The OES coordinates the overall county response to emergencies. The OES is responsible for alerting and notifying appropriate agencies when a disaster strikes; coordinating all agencies that respond; developing plans and procedures for response to and recovery from disasters; developing and providing preparedness materials for the public.

Public Information Officer (PIO)

PIOs are the communications coordinators of their respective agencies. The County PIO serves as the dissemination point for all media releases within an affected area. He coordinates as necessary to ensure that the public within the affected area receives complete, accurate, timely and consistent information. He also reviews and coordinates all related information releases, and maintains a relationship with media representatives.