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Response to Grand Jury Report Form

Report Title: Emergency Alerts and Communications

Report Date: June 20, 2021

Response by: Mark Essick Title: Sheriff

Agency/Department Name: Sonoma County Sheriff's Office

FINDINGS: F4, F6, F7, F8, F9, F10, F11, F12, F13, F14

I (we) agree with the findings numbered: **F4, F6, F9, F10**

I (we) disagree wholly or partially with the findings numbered: **F7, F8, F11, F12, F13, F14**

(Attach a statement specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed with an explanation of the reasons.)

RECOMMENDATIONS: R1, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R10, R11

Recommendations numbered: **R4, R5, R6, and R11** have been implemented.

(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)

Recommendations numbered: **R7 and R8** have not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

(Attach a timeframe for the implementation.)

Recommendations numbered: _____ require(s) further analysis.

(Attach an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report.)

Recommendations numbered: **R1 and R10** will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.

(Attach an explanation.)

Date: 8/10/21 Signed: 

Number of pages attached: **7**

(See attached Civil Grand Jury Response Requirements)

SONOMA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE
RESPONSE TO THE 2020-2021 GRAND JURY REPORT
Emergency Alerts and Communications

FINDINGS

F4. There are some groups and individuals of the population who may not receive alerts directly; these include the elderly, tourists, farm workers, migrants, those hard of hearing, non-English speaking, and individuals with special needs.

RESPONSE: The respondent agrees with the finding.

Although the Department of Emergency Management is ultimately responsible for the County's alert and warnings, the Sheriff's Office agrees that specified groups and individuals may not currently be receiving alerts directly. The Sheriff's Office, in support of the Department of Emergency Management uses numerous warnings systems, including social media (Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter), Nixle, SoCo Alerts, the Wireless Emergency Alert system (WEA), radio and television Emergency Alert Systems, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration radio. Nixle and social media alerts are released in English and Spanish.

Sheriff's Office field service vehicles, which includes all patrol vehicles, are equipped with a Hi/Low siren. This siren produces a different sound than a traditional siren and will only be used to alert residents to evacuate. The unique European style two tone siren will only be utilized to alert residents in specific areas of the need to evacuate. Since the Hi/Low sirens were installed in 2018, the Sheriff's Office has been educating the public on the use of these sirens. Additionally, during emergencies deputies will make public announcements from their patrol vehicles and when necessary and appropriate will make personal contact at residences.

F6. The role of the Emergency Operations Center during recent emergencies has helped to improve the sharing of information among the many fire and police districts and the County as well as improving the consistency of messaging across alert and warning platforms; particularly, the Nixle, SoCoAlerts.

RESPONSE: The respondent agrees with the finding.

The Sheriff's Office appreciates the Grand Jury's commendation for the achievements made in the area of emergency information sharing among police and fire districts as well as the improvements that have been made with consistency of the messaging systems.

F7. The low-technology alert systems (for example hi-lo and air raid sirens), which do not rely on communication towers, provide essential backup during power outages and cellphone tower breakdowns during severe storms or fires.

RESPONSE: The respondent partially disagrees with the finding.

The Sheriff's Office agrees that the two tone, Hi/Low evacuation sirens installed in all Sheriff's Office Field Services vehicles have been a success in effectively notifying individuals to evacuate in both rural and populated areas. Given that the Sheriff's Office is not ultimately responsible for the County's alert and warning systems, the Office is not the appropriate department to evaluate, install, or operate air raid sirens. We are supportive of the County's Department of Emergency Management exploring this alternative solution.

F8. Due to the topography within Sonoma County, the re-institution of audible alarms such as air-raid sirens could dependably reach residents in remote areas and work as a reliable tried-and-true alarm system.

RESPONSE: The respondent partially disagrees with the finding.

The Sheriff's Office partially agrees that air raid sirens placed strategically around the County could potentially reach residents in remote areas; however, the responsibility for the County's alert and warning systems lies with the County's Department of Emergency Management (DEM). Therefore, DEM would be the appropriate department to evaluate the effectiveness of air-raid sirens.

F9. Different evacuation zone designations for the same area (numbers, names, streets, areas, etc.) by the County, cities, CAL FIRE and agencies can lead to confusion for residents during an emergency.

RESPONSE: The respondent agrees with the finding.

The Sheriff's Office agrees that clear direction in regards to evacuation zones can be critical in an active emergency. Over the past four years the Sheriff's Office, in cooperation with DEM, CalFire, and local public safety agencies, has been working on developing a County-wide evacuation mapping system. The goal is to have pre-set evacuation zones for all areas of the County so that people can identify their zone well in advance of a disaster and be better prepared should the need to evacuate arise.

F10. Because evacuation zones were not published or known, prior to the recent emergencies, residents were unaware of their evacuation zones.

RESPONSE: The respondent agrees with the finding.

Since late 2020, the Sheriff's Office has been working with all nine cities within the County to establish a unified evacuation mapping system. On May 24th, 2021, the Sheriff's Office, along with the County's Department of Emergency Management, posted to their websites a complete County-wide evacuation map of the unincorporated areas, along with all nine cities. The County-wide map displays all the numbered evacuation zones in the unincorporated area and the nine incorporated cities. The County-wide evacuation map was shared with every law enforcement agency and fire agency within Sonoma County.

F11. Not all police and fire agencies within the County show an Evacuation Map on their website.

RESPONSE: The respondent partially disagrees with the finding.

The Sheriff's Office does not have jurisdiction or oversight over other police and fire agencies. The County's Department of Emergency Management, as the lead agency for the Sonoma County Operational Area, would take the lead role in coordinating emergency information for the Operational Area. The Sonoma County Operational Area consists of nine incorporated cities: Cloverdale, Cotati, Healdsburg, Petaluma, Rohnert Park, Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Sonoma, and the Town of Windsor as well as Sonoma State University, the Sonoma County Junior College District, and other special districts within the County's geographical boundary.

F12. The County communication network is at risk of communication tower/repeater equipment loss through delayed maintenance and failure to update obsolescent equipment, or disaster loss affecting the Sheriff's Department, city, police, fire agencies, and Redwood Empire Dispatch Communications.

RESPONSE: The respondent partially disagrees with the finding.

Sonoma County's Telecommunications radio-communications system is maintained by the Sheriff's Office Telecommunications Bureau (T-Comm). T-Comm has not delayed maintenance and does not agree that the system is at risk due to aged equipment. The system could greatly benefit from newer technologies and upgrades to older equipment, but such upgrades will not increase or decrease potential tower/repeater/equipment loss. Any significant damage to multiple sites, as a result of a disaster is likely to result in reduced system functionality, to include potential loss of system reliability.

F13. There is no backup system for the County communication towers/repeaters or for commercial cellular towers should they fail to function.

RESPONSE: The respondent partially disagrees with the finding.

Following the 2017 Tubbs Fire, the Sheriff's Office recognized the need for a failsafe mobile warning system, not relying on County communication towers or cellular towers. All Sheriff's Office field service vehicles, including patrol vehicles, are equipped with a Hi/Low siren. The unique European style two tone siren will only be utilized to alert residents in specific areas of the need to evacuate. Since the Hi/Low sirens were installed in 2018, the Sheriff's Office has been educating the public on the use of these sirens. The Hi/Low evacuation sirens emitted from patrol vehicles have been tested through several fires since the Tubbs Fire and have been proven to be effective, notifying individuals in both rural and populated areas. Additionally, during emergencies, deputies will make public announcements from their patrol vehicles and when necessary and appropriate will make personal contact at residences

The County's communications towers include a very robust series of backups, in the event of primary power loss. Every County communication tower includes a backup generator, with sufficient fuel to run for at least 10 days of primary power interruption. In addition, every County communication site includes a robust battery backup system that will continue to power the system, in the case of loss of both primary and generator power. Finally, due to the way that the system has been designed, the loss of a singular site will not drastically impact County wide emergency services.

The Sheriff's Office cannot speak to the commercial cellular provider's infrastructure, equipment, or systems.

F14. The County communication towers/repeaters and cellular provider towers are not maintained and protected (including defensible space) sufficiently to ensure alerts and warnings can go out in the event of a disaster.

RESPONSE: The respondent partially disagrees with the finding.

The County maintains communication sites through three types of land ownership: County-owned real estate, private and commercial land owners, and state-owned land. Given this diverse field of property ownership arrangements, the County can only be responsible for defensible space on County-owned lands. The County's General Services Department, Real Estate Division is responsible for vegetation management at sites owned or managed by the County. While vegetation management on private, commercial, and State land is covered in our real-estate agreements, it is the responsibility of the land owners to fund and perform that work.

The Sheriff's Office cannot speak to the commercial cellular provider's infrastructure, equipment or systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. By October 31, 2021 the Sheriff's Office, Department of Emergency Management, and nine cities' departments include within their Emergency Operations Plans action steps to reach all subpopulations within the County who may not otherwise receive an alert. (F4, F6, F7, F8)

RESPONSE: The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or not reasonable.

The Sonoma County Sheriff's Office is not responsible for the County's Emergency Operations Plans and does not control the County's disaster alert and warning program.

R4. By October 8, 2021, the Sheriff's Office, Department of Emergency Management, and nine cities work together to ensure consistent naming for all evacuation maps used by the public and first responders. (F9, F10, F11)

RESPONSE: The recommendations has been implemented.

Since late 2020, the Sheriff's Office has been working with all nine cities within the County to establish a unified evacuation mapping system. On May 24th, 2021, the Sheriff's Office, along with the County's Department of Emergency Management, posted to their websites a complete County-wide evacuation map of the unincorporated areas, along with all nine cities. The County-wide map displays all the numbered evacuation zones in the unincorporated area and the nine incorporated cities. The County-wide evacuation map was shared with every law enforcement agency and fire agencies within Sonoma County.

R5. By October 8, 2021, the Sheriff's Office, Department of Emergency Management, and nine cities work together to ensure the public is informed of their evacuation zones by publishing evacuation maps in local media, online, and through SoCo Emergency. (F9, F10, F11)

RESPONSE: The recommendation has been implemented.

The Sheriff's Office has informed the public of on evacuation zones within the County's jurisdiction by publishing evacuation maps in local media, online, and through SoCo Emergency. The Sheriff's Office cannot guarantee commitment from other agencies/cities or set deadlines for these organizations as we have no jurisdiction over them. However, since late 2020, the Sheriff's Office has been working with all nine cities within the County to establish a unified evacuation mapping system. On May 24th, 2021, the Sheriff's Office, along with the County's Department of Emergency Management, posted to their websites a complete County-wide evacuation map of the unincorporated areas, along with all nine cities. The County-wide map

displays all the numbered evacuation zones in the unincorporated area and the nine incorporated cities. The County-wide evacuation map was shared with every law enforcement agency and fire agencies within Sonoma County.

R6. By December 31, 2021, the Sheriff's Office develop a plan and identify what is needed to bring the communication tower equipment/repeaters up-to-date to ensure during an emergency the systems function (legacy and end of life systems.) (F12, F13)

RESPONSE: The recommendation has been implemented.

The Sheriff's Office Telecommunications Bureau continually monitors and analyzes existing communications tower equipment and repeater systems for obsolescence/end of life concerns. Those items that are deemed most critical to overall communications system functionality are annually submitted for funding to the County Board of Supervisors as part of the County's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). The most current list of these projects is contained in the FY 2021-2026 Capital Improvement Plan ([Sonoma County Capital Improvement Plan](#)).

R7. By March 31, 2022, the Sheriff's Office and Board of Supervisors provide funding to maintain the communication tower equipment/repeaters. (F12, F13, F14)

RESPONSE: The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

The Sheriff submits requests for equipment replacement funding on behalf of the Telecommunications Bureau through the County's Capital Improvement Plan process. The General Services Department and County Administrator then make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors, whom ultimately have authority to appropriate funding. This process takes place in conjunction with the County's annual budget process in the spring of each year.

R8. By June 30, 2022, the Sheriff's Office implement the plan to bring the communication tower equipment/repeaters up-to-date. (F12)

RESPONSE: The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

The implementation of the above recommendation is dependent on the results of the analysis outlined in the response to the Grand Jury's Recommendation 6 and the Board of Supervisors funding of projects in the Sonoma County 2021-2026 Capital Improvement Plan and future CIPs.

R10. By October 31, 2021 the Sheriff's Office and Department of Emergency Management work with the Fire Agencies in the county work ensure that defensible space standards (as outlined by CAL FIRE) are met for all county communication towers/repeaters and cellular provider network towers. (F12, F13, F14)

RESPONSE: This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or not reasonable.

As stated in the Sheriff's Office response to Finding 14, the County cannot assume responsibility for vegetation management on sites that they do not directly own or manage. Furthermore, the Sheriff's Office does not maintain the responsibility of vegetation management on County owned property. This responsibility falls under the County's General Services Department.

R11. By September 30, 2021, The Sheriff's Office and Department of Emergency Management work with the Fire Agencies in the County to define actions to take during a disaster for the protection of all County communication towers/repeaters and cellular network towers. (F12, F13, F14)

RESPONSE: This recommendation has been implemented.

During natural disasters, the Sheriff's Office Telecommunications Bureau is in constant contact with CalFire and local fire agencies regarding the protection of County public-safety communications infrastructure. These efforts are evidenced by the protection of the Mount Jackson communications site during the LNU Complex fires from 2020.