

SONOMA COUNTY EMPLOYEES – WAITING TO BE TRAINED FOR DISASTER

Summary

Major disasters, such as the Oakland Hills Fire, the Loma Prieta earthquake and Hurricane Katrina, have a major impact on the emergency resources of a community. In some instances, Emergency Response personnel, also known as First Responders, have been completely overwhelmed and therefore unavailable to respond to many of the requests for assistance within a reasonable timeframe. If a major disaster occurs in this area, employees of Sonoma County, if properly trained, would be able to provide interim assistance to the emergency response personnel and to the public.

Reason for Investigation

The Sonoma County Grand Jury Final Report 2004-2005 recommended that plans be put in place to ensure that all existing employees have been or will be trained in a Emergency Recovery Plan.

The current grand jury felt that it was justifiable to do a follow-up on the training status of Sonoma County employees.

Some county employees were unsure of their role during a disaster, unsure when and where to report during a disaster, and how to contact management if normal communication facilities were down and/or overloaded.

All Sonoma County employees are to have received the required National Incident Management System (NIMS) training by the end of 2007.

Background

Disaster: A sudden calamitous emergency event bringing great damage loss or destruction. (Glossary, Sonoma County Emergency Operations Plan)

Emergency: A condition of disaster or of extreme peril to the safety of persons and property caused by such conditions as air pollution, fire, flood, hazardous material incident, storm, epidemic, riot, drought, sudden and severe energy shortage, plant or animal infestations or disease, the Governor's warning of an earthquake or volcanic prediction, or an earthquake or other conditions, other than conditions resulting from a labor controversy. (Glossary, Sonoma County Emergency Operations Plan)

National Incident Management System (NIMS): A system mandated by Homeland Security Presidential Directive-5 (HSPD-5) that provides a consistent nationwide approach for Federal, State, local, and tribal governments; the private-sector, and organizations to work effectively and efficiently together to prepare for, respond to, and recover from domestic incidents, regardless of cause, size, or complexity. To provide for interoperability and compatibility among Federal, State, local, and tribal capabilities, the NIMS includes a core set of concepts, principles, and terminology. HSPD-5 identifies these as the Incident Command System (ICS);

Multi-agency Coordination Systems; training; identification and management of resources (including systems for classifying types of resources); qualification and certification; and the collection, tracking, and reporting of incident information and incident resources.
(Glossary, Sonoma County Emergency Operations Plan)

In times of disaster every County employee becomes a Disaster Service Worker. For emergencies and disasters, county employees are divided into two groups:

Emergency Response (First Responder) personnel such as firefighters, law enforcement, emergency medical personnel, sanitation personnel, etc.

And

Sonoma County employees, who are not First Responders, such as auditors, payroll clerks, engineers, mechanics, road equipment operators, administrative assistants, etc.

Emergency Response personnel are continuously trained in their disciplines, participate in drills and exercises, and may perform emergency duties as part of their assigned job.

Investigative Procedures

Sonoma County Department of Emergency Services members were interviewed.

The following documents were reviewed:

- The Sonoma County / Operational Area Emergency Operations Plan - October 2006,
- Past grand jury reports
- Emergency Operations Center Exercise Plan
- Emergency Public Information Call-Taker training material
- The internet web page of the Sonoma County Department of Emergency Services
- Training data from the Sonoma County Human Resource database.

The Sonoma County Grand Jury conducted unannounced visits to Sonoma County government entities where Sonoma County employees were randomly selected for interviews. These entities were:

- Road Maintenance
- Agricultural Commission
- Sheriff (secretary/community service)
- Waste Water Reclamation Facility
- Health Services
- Facility Operations
- Architectural
- Regional Parks
- Airport
- Board of Education
- Information Systems

Findings

F1. Emergency preparedness, First Aid, Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and Automated External Defibrillator (AED) training is not consistent for all Disaster Service Workers throughout the governmental entities¹ of Sonoma County.

F2. Sonoma County employees, who are not first responders, want to attend Emergency and Disaster type training such as First Aid, CPR, AED, Emergency Preparedness, etc.

F3. Some Sonoma County employees, who are not first responders, have completed training on their own, such as First Aid and CPR.

F4. Sonoma County employees, who are not first responders, have expressed an interest to participate in and/or observe emergency/disaster drills and exercises as part of their training.

F5. Sonoma County employees, who are not first responders, are willing to provide assistance during an emergency and disaster event.

F6. All county employees must complete the National Incident Management System (NIMS) course by the end of calendar year 2007. As of March 29, 2007, there were 349 county employees that have completed NIMS training. The 349 employees represent approximately 7% of the total county employees of 4,850. (Note: About 2 to 3% of the total number of employees include retirees and extra-help employees who remain in the payroll system.)

F7. New employees of Sonoma County receive emergency/disaster training during employee orientation.

F8. Ten percent of Homeland Security Grant Funds, are designated for emergency exercises and training.

F9. Specialized training is provided to county employees to accomplish unique assignments during emergencies/disasters. For example, architects are trained to evaluate structural integrity of buildings to determine if access and occupancy is safe.

F10. Some county employees were not aware of their role during a disaster, unsure when and where to report during a disaster, and how to contact management for instructions and assignments if normal communication facilities were down and/or overloaded.

F11. When a disaster does occur some county employees are needed to “keep the doors open” for the county government to continue serving its employees and the public.

F12. County employees want to be able to provide assistance to the public during emergencies but lack basic disaster training in First Aid, CPR, AED, emergency preparedness etc.

¹ Entities refer to Sonoma County departments, agencies, commissions, committees, services, grand juries, etc. where county employees are assigned.

Conclusions

Given the potential for a disastrous event of some kind in Sonoma County, the grand jury considers the county's innate responsibility for providing its citizens with emergency, medical and logistical services to be of utmost importance and priority.

The functional implementation of such services is daunting, indeed. This sense of how overwhelming this task would be is what makes the necessity of dedicated, diligent and disciplined preparation on the part of Sonoma County and its cities ever more essential and urgent.

The Department of Emergency Services has worked steadfastly in obtaining grant monies, making information available and providing guidance to all entities in the county. The notion that emergency preparedness plans and procedures exist is a necessary step in the process but, in fact, it is merely the beginning.

The myriad of other county workers who are required to aid and reinforce in emergencies will also be central for other non-essential support services. These employees may prove to be just as vital as first responders when it comes to serving as liaisons to the community, whether that be the elderly, office workers, properly prepared families or those who inherently crater under the weight of the situation. All county citizens will need leadership and accurate information from emergency agencies in order to survive and reconstruct their family lives. We will count heavily on county employees to be available and knowledgeable about communication and other pivotal issues.

The fact that employees of Sonoma County express an eagerness to assist the public during emergencies and are willing to spend the time and effort to attend training classes and participate in practice sessions is a positive and contributing step in the right direction. However, as of March 2007, close to 93% of the employees of Sonoma County had not completed their mandatory NIMS training. This is not a good indicator of diligent preparation. It will be another daunting challenge to have all employees trained by December as the Emergency Plan suggests.

The jury concludes that desire and intent are not enough. Sonoma County upper level managers need to lead by example to obtain training, actively participating in exercises and drills, working to create a sense of urgency in times of tranquility and routine and making management calendars and budgets work to include valuable time for training and preparation courses for all Sonoma County employees.

A specific and bona fide timetable for employee training and regular, programmatic updates needs to be established and adhered to or all the best intentions of the world could turn to ashes.

Commendations

The Sonoma County Grand Jury would like to thank those Sonoma County employees who assisted in providing valuable information toward this report.

The Sonoma County Grand Jury was impressed with the quality and skills of county employees, and their willingness to assist the public during emergency and non-emergency periods.

The Sonoma County Grand Jury found that the manager and staff of the Emergency Management Division of the Sonoma County Department of Emergency Services were professional, very knowledgeable, experienced, and helpful.

Recommendations

R1 – All Sonoma County employees should receive emergency preparedness training with annual updates/refresher.

R2 – All Sonoma County employees should be provided the opportunity for First Aid, CPR, and AED training.

R3 – On an annual basis ensure that all county employees know their assigned duties, reporting locations, and contact methods during an emergency and disaster event.

R4 – Develop, implement, and monitor a strategy and plan that ensures all County Employees complete the National Incident Management System course by the end of calendar year 2007.

R5 – On an annual basis ensure that Department Heads, Agency Chairperson, and upper level managers of all Sonoma County entities fully participate in emergency/disaster training and the exercises/drills.

R6 – All Sonoma County employees should be made aware of how to contact management if normal communication facilities are down or overloaded.

Required responses to Findings

None

Requested responses to Recommendations

None

Required responses to Recommendations

Board of Supervisors – R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6

Sonoma County Department of Emergency Services – R4