

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER

Up and ready or down and out?

SUMMARY

The Santa Barbara County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is a facility designed to bring together representatives of all relevant agencies during a major emergency. The Grand Jury evaluated the EOC's physical facilities, back-up emergency systems, operations planning documents, and on-site emergency supplies.

Serious deficiencies were found in the physical facility itself along with cumbersome procedures for providing emergency power and communications systems. County employees with knowledge of how to manually hook up the emergency power to the EOC must respond to the site and make it operational. Most of these personnel live beyond the Santa Barbara south coast region, which could greatly delay the activation of the EOC.

The Grand Jury recommends relocating the EOC to a new location more suitable to withstanding an earthquake and equipping it with emergency electrical systems that will automatically provide emergency power.

INTRODUCTION

A trained and educated emergency management team coming together in an efficient centralized multi-agency command and control center during a major emergency provides our citizens and rescue personnel with leadership and coordination.

Throughout Santa Barbara County, fire and law enforcement personnel deal with daily emergencies by managing them locally, utilizing a proven and efficient management system called the Incident Command System. This system has worked so efficiently for first responders that it has been adopted by State and Federal agencies along with the United States military to coordinate major emergencies.

The Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), developed at the State level, has been adopted by local jurisdictions within Santa Barbara County. SEMS reduces confusion and inefficiency by ensuring that all emergency management tasks and assignments are carried out under the same management system.

At the heart of both of these management systems is the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The EOC function is designed to bring together the representatives of all participating emergency agencies during a major emergency. They gather

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information from emergency responders, present it to the incident decision makers, develop management and containment strategies, and coordinate timely emergency information notification to the public.

The Grand Jury conducted an inquiry into the emergency training that County employees receive at the EOC. The suitability of the present EOC to be functional and provide vital coordination during a major disaster was also evaluated. The Grand Jury witnessed demonstrations at Santa Barbara County's EOC and an Emergency Operation Center in a neighboring county. Santa Barbara County employees and management staff were interviewed, site visits to support facilities were conducted, and training exercises were witnessed. Emergency procedures and planning documents were examined and verified from the agencies that have direct responsibilities for these emergency functions.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The EOC is activated when large emergency events occur in Santa Barbara County that require the coordination of multiple agencies and affect large populations of our County. The EOC provides a centralized location where local authorities are able to have face-to-face coordination among persons who must make the emergency decisions.

Over the past twenty years, the County has moved this Emergency Operations Center function from various facilities and departments to its present location within the Santa Barbara County Employees University. This facility is a non-rated (fire, earthquake) portable modular classroom building located in the parking lot of the old County General Hospital building. It serves as a day-to-day classroom facility and is only intended to be used as an EOC when an actual major emergency occurs.

The management of the EOC falls under the jurisdiction of the Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services, headed by an Emergency Services Manager under the direction of the County Fire Chief. The County Office of Emergency Services is responsible for the emergency training of all County employees, planning, preparations, staffing, and exercising of the functions of the EOC.

The Grand Jury found that emergency plans and procedures used by EOC participants need to be updated. Vital decision-making information needs to be on-site rather than in participants' offices spread throughout the County. Emphasis on improved planning, preparation, and rapid activation of a new EOC location should be a top goal of the County Board of Supervisors and County administration.

Emergency Operations Center Structure

The EOC is presently located within the Santa Barbara County Employees University

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building, 267 Camino del Remedio, Santa Barbara, with an alternate location at the Santa Barbara County Fire Headquarters at 4410 Cathedral Oaks Road, Santa Barbara.

The EOC is located in a room within a portable modular classroom facility. This building, while presently being used as a training facility for County employees, is not rated to house a critical emergency function of government and has a high probability of failing in an earthquake or local fire similar to the Paint Fire. The facility was originally intended to temporarily house the EOC. No funding for the relocation of this vital emergency function to another more secure and appropriate location has been provided or planned for by elected or administrative officials. The Grand Jury finds this structure to be an unsatisfactory site for the EOC.

The Grand Jury recommends the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors and County Administration immediately prioritize the process of identifying a new dedicated or shared site for the EOC. This location, new or existing, should meet construction standards for housing emergency government functions. Further, the Board of Supervisors and County administration should secure funding for this relocation. Procrastination of this effort places our County at risk of not having a functioning EOC during a major disaster.

Emergency Power at the EOC

An electrical generator located in a locked garage adjacent to the EOC building is intended to supply emergency power to the EOC. In the event of a local power failure, a County public works employee must respond to the site, hook up an emergency power cable from the generator to the EOC, and start the generator. At the time of the Grand Jury's site visit, all County public works employees with knowledge of how to perform these tasks lived outside the south coast area. Until this emergency power can be hooked up and operational, the EOC will be without power. Further, while the emergency generator is run on a regular basis, the actual hook-up and operation of the EOC using this emergency generator is not tested on a regular basis.

A dedicated electrical hook-up should be installed between the EOC and the emergency generator whereby the generator will automatically start and provide power to the EOC in the event of a local power failure. Relying on personnel responding from home in order to establish emergency power may greatly delay the activation of a functional EOC.

Communications Switching Equipment

Telephone switching and computer networking equipment necessary to activate these systems in the EOC is located in a hall closet of the facility. The equipment is not anchored to the structure, making it subject to damage in the event of an earthquake.

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The EOC telephone switching and computer networking equipment should be equipped with earthquake mounting bracketing. Printed instructions on the equipment should be visible to inform persons activating the EOC how to hook up the emergency communications lines. Presently these systems have to be manually connected.

Information and Supplies

At the time of the Grand Jury's visit to the EOC it appeared that the facility lacked updated maps, plans, procedure manuals, logistical resource information, and support supplies. Emergency responders, participants, and decision makers staffing the EOC are expected to respond first to their daily work site (office), in order to pick up needed information before they go to the EOC.

The Office of Emergency Services should develop a process whereby agencies with assigned functions in the EOC have updated manuals, maps, and decision-making information at the EOC at all times. This information should be updated as necessary and maintained at the EOC to eliminate the delay of employees traveling to their remote offices throughout the County before going to the EOC.

Training

At the time of this report, employees of Santa Barbara County who are not employed in one of the public safety departments receive as little as one hour of emergency training regarding their roles in a major disaster.

The Office of Emergency Services should expand its employee emergency training programs to not just focus on new employees but continue to train all existing employees. This training should occur on an annual basis so employees will remain informed of current County emergency procedures and what is expected of them during a disaster.

Further, the County Administrator and department managers reporting to the Office of Emergency Services should incorporate emergency related functions and employee training in emergency preparedness in their job descriptions and as a goal in their annual performance evaluations.

Conclusion

When a major emergency or disaster strikes our area, no one facility will be more important to the residents of Santa Barbara County than the EOC. The Grand Jury faults the leadership of Santa Barbara County for not providing its citizens and emergency agency leaders with a permanent EOC location capable of withstanding the very emergency events that it is designed to manage. Although the total inadequacy of this facility was brought to the attention of the County Administrator

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and Board of Supervisors by the 1995-1996 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury, no action has been taken to correct a dangerous and potentially life-threatening situation.

Santa Barbara County emergency employees continue to try to make the best of this very serious flaw in our County's emergency preparedness system. The Board of Supervisors needs to take direct responsibility to commit funds and resources to provide a suitable EOC for the citizens of Santa Barbara County that will be functional during a major emergency and will provide coordination and management of our emergency resources.

FINDINGS

Finding 1

The Santa Barbara County EOC is housed in a temporary modular building that is not rated for an emergency government function and could fail in an earthquake.

Finding 2

In the event of a power failure at the EOC after business hours, emergency back-up power must be manually hooked up to the facility by employees living outside the south coast area.

Finding 3

Telephone switching and computer networking equipment necessary to activate the communications systems in the EOC is located in a hall closet of the facility and is not anchored to the structure, making it subject to damage in the event of an earthquake.

Finding 4

At the time of the Grand Jury's visit to the EOC, it appeared that the facility lacked updated emergency maps, plans, procedure manuals, logistical resource information, and support supplies. Emergency responders, participants, and decision-makers staffing the EOC are expected to go first to their daily work site (office) and pick up information they need before going to the EOC.

Finding 5

Employees of Santa Barbara County who are not employed in one of the public safety departments may receive as little as one hour of emergency training regarding their roles in a major disaster.

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Finding 6

Presently there is no motivating factor that requires the County Administrative Officer or County department heads to keep emergency and disaster training as a high priority for themselves or their employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

The Board of Supervisors and County Administration should immediately prioritize the process of identifying a new site for the EOC that meets construction standards for emergency government functions.

Recommendation 2

Install a dedicated electrical hook-up between the EOC and the emergency generator whereby the generator will automatically start and provide power to the EOC in the event of a local power failure.

Recommendation 3

Secure the EOC telephone system and computer networking switching equipment with earthquake mounting bracketing. Printed instructions on the equipment should be visible to inform persons activating the EOC how to hook up the emergency communications lines.

Recommendation 4

Provide updated manuals, maps, and decision making information at the EOC at all times for agencies with assigned functions in the EOC.

Recommendation 5

Expand employee emergency training programs to not just focus on new employees but to train all employees on an annual basis so they will remain informed of current County emergency procedures and what is expected of them in a disaster.

Recommendation 6

Incorporate emergency related functions and employee training in emergency preparedness in the job descriptions of the County Administrative Officer and department managers and as a goal in their annual performance evaluations.

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REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

In accordance with Section 933(c) of the California Penal Code, 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 – 60 days

Finding	1
Recommendation	1

Santa Barbara County Executive Officer – 90 days

Findings	1, 6
Recommendations	1, 6

Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services – 90 days

Findings	2, 3, 4, 5
Recommendations	2, 3, 4, 5

Santa Barbara County Fire Department – 90 days

Findings	1, 2, 3, 4
Recommendations	1, 2, 3, 4