

EMERGENCY PUBLIC INFORMATION

What's happening? Where do I go? What should I do?

SUMMARY

Emergency public information systems are intended to warn our residents of a major emergency and actions they need to take to protect their lives and property.

Specific areas of review by the Grand Jury resulting in recommendations were:

- existing emergency alert system utilizing television and radio stations
- Reverse 911 notification system
- local low-power radio information systems
- coordination of public information officers
- emergency public education for residents, businesses, and schools

Emergencies occurring in or near Santa Barbara County in 2005 brought to the public's attention major weaknesses in local government and media abilities to provide residents with timely and accurate emergency information. Information regarding specifics of the emergencies, evacuations, road closures, and other vital announcements were slow in reaching the public and, in several cases, were inaccurate and misleading.

While Santa Barbara County has made some improvements in the emergency notification system, many methods presently relied upon remain outdated, unreliable, and ineffective.

The Grand Jury recommends that our County's elected and appointed officials act immediately to improve the methods and the means by which the residents of Santa Barbara County receive vital emergency information required to save lives and property.

INTRODUCTION

Each day Santa Barbara County's law enforcement, fire, and municipal agencies deal with a variety of emergencies that require public information announcements to be broadcast on radio or television. The public may be informed of these events by spot radio announcements, by stations broadcasting live, or by use of frequency scanners and phone calls from neighbors and friends. Most emergencies are local in nature – house fires, traffic accidents, medical emergencies, or even street closures

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due to flooding or downed trees, affecting only those persons involved in or located near the event, which may require them to temporarily relocate or evacuate dangerous areas.

The larger the emergency or disaster, the more critical it becomes that emergency officials have reliable and effective communications methods available to them to keep the public informed. The methods of receiving this timely and accurate emergency information should be known to the public through an aggressive and well-supported public information program. Every resident, employee, and school child should know how to access valuable emergency information that will help guide him or her through a major emergency and survive its aftermath.

This inquiry looked at those agencies within the County and private sector with direct responsibility for informing and educating the public. Concern for the effectiveness of our existing methods of informing the public of emergencies came to the Grand Jury's attention from concerned citizens, government employees, business leaders, and school personnel, as well as emergency responders. The Grand Jury conducted interviews, witnessed training exercises, reviewed emergency plans and documents, and performed site visits to formulate its findings and recommendations.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The Grand Jury's inquiry into the current emergency public information methods that exist within Santa Barbara County found the following notification systems that are intended to inform and direct us in an emergency.

- The Santa Barbara County Emergency Alert System is part of the State of California's Emergency Alert System, intended to be broadcast on radio and television networks that have agreed to do so.
- The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has made available a new low-power emergency radio system to local jurisdictions whereby residents can tune to a set radio frequency for emergency information specific to their own area. This system is presently in use by the Painted Cave community, funded by a Homeland Security grant.
- The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department Dispatch Center has in place a newly developed Reverse 911 notification capability that utilizes specific area telephone systems to notify residents of nearby emergencies and possible evacuations.
- The State, County, and California Highway Patrol all have websites that, when updated, provide emergency information as well as information related to road closures and evacuation routes.

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- Local television and radio stations, when staffed, dispatch a reporter to the emergency in order to broadcast live or record information for scheduled news broadcasts. Many of the stations are not staffed late at night.
- In the event of an emergency causing a major loss of power and domestic communication sources, fire and law enforcement agencies plan to utilize patrol vehicles and helicopter public address systems as well as door-to-door notification to advise residents to evacuate.

The Grand Jury found that while some agencies have enhanced their emergency information delivery methods (Reverse 911 Warning System and low frequency radio station) other existing methods appear to be unreliable.

Radio and Television

Radio and television stations in the past have been reliable sources of emergency information within Santa Barbara County. Residents were able to tune to a local radio station or turn on the television and hear and see emergency events occurring and get up-to-date information on what they should do and how to avoid areas where emergencies were occurring. The Grand Jury found that this is no longer the case.

Santa Barbara County has no single designated 24-hour radio station that residents can tune to for accurate updated emergency information. In contrast, the County of Ventura has an agreement with one designated radio station to act as its primary source of emergency information for the general public. A hotline has been installed in the Ventura County Emergency Operations Center that goes directly to the radio station, providing fast broadcast of updated and accurate information to its residents.

Santa Barbara County's local media networks have been consolidated or purchased by large outside network companies, many of which use prerecorded broadcasting and have reduced or no staff on duty during most of the 24-hour day. Often County emergency public information personnel at the scene of an event will send out an emergency news alert to the news media which may result in limited or no response. This adversely affects the ability of emergency personnel to notify the general public of major events affecting them and increases the anxiety and confusion of the public. Events like the La Conchita earth-slide and the 2005 Gaviota fire were examples of this problem. The public was uninformed and confused due to the lack of timely and accurate information about evacuations and highway closures.

The Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services (OES) and emergency public information personnel need to work with representatives of our local broadcasting networks to develop a system of emergency notification and response that will allow vital information to flow rapidly from an event to the general public. The OES should establish an agreement with a local or out-of-county radio or

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television station that will act as our County's designated station to provide emergency information 24 hours a day. This will require exploring new and innovative approaches to gathering and delivering information to the public utilizing our local media or even media outside our County.

These improvements should be joined with an aggressive public education program making residents aware of where to tune to in an emergency.

Emergency Alert System

Santa Barbara County currently utilizes a local emergency alert system. This system is part of the California State Emergency Alert System, whereby local radio and television stations within the County voluntarily broadcast selected messages from the United States Weather Service and the Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services. These messages appear as information scrolling across the bottom of television screens or audio information interrupting programmed radio broadcasting networks that have agreed to participate in the Emergency Alert System. Local media voluntarily participate in this system and are under no obligation to pass this information on to the public.

Santa Barbara County Administration and the Office of Emergency Services should enter into formal and binding agreements with media providers requiring their active participation in the Emergency Alert System.

Reverse 911

The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department and Lompoc Police Department Dispatch Centers have installed an emergency telephone notification system called *Reverse 911 Emergency Notification System*. This system can telephone residents in designated areas and give them recorded voice information about an emergency and the actions they should take. This system is modern, progressive, and has been proven to be an effective means of notifying residents of emergencies, provided that the telephone system is operating.

The Grand Jury finds that the Reverse 911 Emergency Notification System is an excellent means of notifying specific areas of limited population and should be expanded into all emergency dispatch centers throughout Santa Barbara County.

While the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department has offered the use of the Reverse 911 Emergency Alert System to other agencies, the Grand Jury recommends that these agencies provide their own capabilities in order not to overload the Sheriff's Department's existing system during a County-wide emergency.

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Low-Power Emergency Alert System

An effective Low-Power Radio Emergency Alert System is currently utilized by residents of San Marcos Pass and Painted Cave. This system is similar to a local airport information radio station. The station gives local residents information about events occurring in their area (for example, road closures, fires, traffic accidents). The system does not interfere with commercial broadcasts and can be localized to a specific area.

The Grand Jury recommends that the County of Santa Barbara, City of Santa Barbara, and the Montecito Fire District develop a program within their jurisdictions that provides an opportunity for the community to purchase, install, and operate these radio systems in areas with a wildfire history.

Internet

Santa Barbara County presently does not have an Internet website or hotline telephone number to provide updated information on real-time occurring emergencies. The Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services and Santa Barbara County Fire Department both operate websites that provide general information about their agencies and basic emergency preparedness information. However, neither agency has an information hotline that provides real-time emergency information.

The Grand Jury recommends that the County of Santa Barbara and cities within the County develop an emergency information website and telephone hotline for the public. This could be done by individual jurisdictions or through a joint powers agreement where residents throughout the County could access one site or dial one number and get fast and accurate emergency information. This system would be relatively inexpensive to implement and would greatly reduce the number of uninformed or curious citizens calling 911 emergency lines directly to inquire about what is occurring and what they should do.

Schools and Children

Parents of children throughout Santa Barbara County have varying degrees of knowledge of what actions they should take when an emergency occurs while their children are at school.

The Grand Jury finds that school districts and emergency agencies need to work together to re-evaluate and update current school disaster plans and procedures for emergencies and perform outreach so parents have better access to knowledge.

Once these plans are updated and approved, school districts should develop a parent

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education process whereby parents will know what to expect when their children are at school and a major emergency occurs. Information should be disseminated in both English and Spanish where appropriate.

Informing the Public

The process of collecting and disseminating vital public emergency information from the incident commander to the public needs to be improved County-wide. The Grand Jury found that the problem of getting accurate information about the emergency from the person in charge of the incident, referred to as the incident commander, is not agency-specific. Many factors contribute to this problem: changes in the way the local media is accessible, retirement of experienced personnel, lack of training, and a lack of commitment of resources to solve the problem. This problem involves all emergency agencies and media sources responsible for collecting information and accurately and rapidly getting it to residents so they can react to minimize disorder and danger to life and property.

The awareness of this communication problem and the desire to improve the emergency public information system within Santa Barbara County has motivated those responsible to come together and form the Emergency Public Information Communicators Group (EPIC). The Group has partnered with the American Red Cross and will bring together representatives from all emergency agencies with the goal of improving emergency communications County-wide.

The Grand Jury applauds this first step on the part of the Emergency Public Information Communicators Group. The Grand Jury recommends that this effort be supported by elected and administrative officials and that time and resources be focused on improving the systems that are intended to keep the public informed.

FINDINGS

Finding 1

The present system of getting information to the public will likely fail in a major disaster. Recent consolidations of radio and television stations in Santa Barbara have led to prerecorded formatting. This format makes the availability of live emergency information difficult if not impossible.

Finding 2

The Office of Emergency Services presently relies on voluntary participation of radio and television providers to participate in the Emergency Alert System.

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Finding 3

Only the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department and the Lompoc Police Department Dispatch Centers have a Reverse 911 Notification System. These dispatch centers could be greatly impacted by large populated cities like Santa Maria and Santa Barbara requesting the use of their systems in a County-wide emergency.

Finding 4

Based upon results, the Low-Power Radio Emergency Alert System presently utilized by residents of Painted Cave is an excellent means of notifying people of emergencies occurring in their area. Presently this system is only used in the Highway 154 Painted Cave area.

Finding 5

Santa Barbara County and emergency agencies within its borders do not have an emergency website or telephone number where citizens can access real-time emergency information.

Finding 6

The Office of Emergency Services has not designated an emergency radio station to which residents may tune to receive accurate updated emergency information on a 24-hour basis.

Finding 7

Parent education programs in schools throughout Santa Barbara County have had varying degrees of success in informing parents what will happen to their children during and after an emergency.

Finding 8

In late 2005, representatives of agencies in Santa Barbara County that are responsible for providing the public with emergency information formed a public information group (EPIC), with the goal to address problems relating to the collection, verification and dissemination of accurate emergency information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

The Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services should work with news media representatives in Santa Barbara County to develop an emergency public

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information system that will keep the public informed during a disaster.

Recommendation 2

The County of Santa Barbara should enter into a permanent agreement with local media stations guaranteeing their participation in the Emergency Alert System.

Recommendation 3

Within Santa Barbara County, each city and special fire district dispatch center should establish its own independent Reverse 911 Emergency Notification System. This will reduce the possibility of overloading the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department and Lompoc Police Department Dispatch Centers in the event of a County-wide major disaster.

Recommendation 4

All areas within Santa Barbara County that have the unique topography and vulnerability to wildfires or flooding should install a Low-Power Radio Emergency Alert System to warn their residents.

Recommendation 5

Santa Barbara County should immediately develop an emergency Internet website or hotline telephone number that will allow its residents to get real-time accurate emergency information. This website or hotline telephone number should be updated with the same information that is given to the media.

Recommendation 6

The Office of Emergency Services should enter into an agreement with a 24-hour media radio station that will be designated as the official emergency station for Santa Barbara County.

Recommendation 7

School districts throughout Santa Barbara County should review their school site disaster plans with their local emergency agencies to ensure that the plans are updated and appropriate. Schools should expand their efforts to keep students and parents informed of all aspects of emergency preparedness and survival through written information provided in both English and Spanish when appropriate.

Recommendation 8

All participating agencies should continue to support the efforts of the Emergency

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Public Information Communicators Group (EPIC), which is dedicated to improving the emergency public information system throughout Santa Barbara County.

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 Executive Officer - 90 days

Findings	2, 5
Recommendations	2, 5

Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Services - 90 days

Findings	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8
Recommendations	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8

Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department - 60 days

Findings	3, 8
Recommendations	3, 8

City of Santa Barbara - 60 days

Findings	3, 4, 8
Recommendations	3, 4, 8

City of Lompoc - 60 days

Findings	3, 4, 8
Recommendations	3, 4, 8

City of Carpinteria - 60 days

Findings	3, 4, 8
Recommendations	3, 4, 8

City of Santa Maria - 60 days

Findings	3, 8
Recommendations	3, 8

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Montecito Fire Protection District - 60 days

Findings	3, 4, 8
Recommendations	3, 4, 8