

EMERGENCY SHELTERING

Where Do We Go?

SUMMARY

When a natural or manmade disaster strikes, such as a major earthquake, wildfire, flood, terrorism incident, or other large-scale event, normal life for Santa Barbara County residents will be disrupted until, and perhaps after, safety and public services can be restored. The Grand Jury investigated how local government agencies plan to help residents deal with such disruptions.

More importantly, residents should plan to be self-sufficient for at least three and up to seven days. Although County, State, and city governments, as well as the American Red Cross, have published emergency planning information for residents, few are prepared to shelter in place. The Grand Jury recommends an aggressive educational program by our governments to increase awareness and preparedness.

When evacuation is directed during an emergency, the Red Cross, a non-governmental agency, selects the location for a shelter, sets up the shelter with cots and food supplies, and assigns a shelter manager. The County Social Services Department assigns staff who assist in registration, logistics, and food service at the shelter. The Grand Jury found that the Department of Social Services budget does not provide for adequate training of staff and joint exercises with the Red Cross.

Long-term relocation is typically arranged by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The Standardized Emergency Management System, SEMS, includes the role of FEMA in support of emergencies within Santa Barbara County.

INTRODUCTION

When a natural or manmade disaster strikes, such as a major earthquake, wildfire, flood, terrorism incident, or another large-scale event, normal life for County residents will be disrupted until, and perhaps after, safety and public services can be restored.

The Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) states, “A large magnitude (Richter) earthquake will occur in the near future.... The intensity of this anticipated earthquake could cause devastation beyond anything recently experienced in this area....”

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Because most residents will be on their own during the first days after a catastrophic earthquake, the Grand Jury assessed their readiness to be self-sufficient. Because residents may be required to evacuate to emergency shelters set up by the Red Cross, the Grand Jury reviewed the process for setting up and operating shelters. If the emergency is of longer duration, residents may be placed in long-term shelter arrangements provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

In examining the planning for emergency housing in the County, the Grand Jury reviewed documents and conducted interviews with key members of the Red Cross and County Department of Social Services.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

When a disaster occurs, residents may be sheltered in three ways:

1. Shelter in place (three to seven days)
2. Short-term sheltering
3. Long-term sheltering

Shelter in Place

When a disaster occurs, residents may be on their own for several days. Even when outside help is available from a government agency or others, some residents may not be first to receive relief because other residents may need help more urgently. Emergency personnel cannot help all of the residents at the same time. Although emergency services are generally well prepared to handle most emergencies, community needs in a disaster can easily exceed the capability of the government agencies. Staying at home may be the safest course of action. Residents should plan to be self-sufficient for at least three and up to seven days.

Education on the urgency of resident preparedness is not reaching enough Santa Barbara County residents. Although Federal, State, County, and city governments, as well as the Red Cross, have published emergency planning information for residents, it is reported that very few residents are prepared to shelter in place at their own residences. Ways to address this problem include:

- dissemination of information through the school systems, public TV, radio, newspapers and magazines, literature distributed by government agencies, and utility bill mailings
- emergency educational programs sponsored by community organizations
- public education provided by government emergency planning departments

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In a major disaster, especially after an earthquake, many homes will have no water service, no electricity, no gas for cooking or heat, and no local radio. Local telephone, cell phones, and the Internet may be disabled by the emergency or by high usage. Roads may be blocked, either by damage or high traffic.

Families should be prepared with food, water, clothing, and supplies including a portable radio, flashlights and batteries, first-aid kit, plastic sheeting and duct tape, and garbage bags. In addition, families should have all necessary medical supplies on hand. Special medical needs should be planned with alternate solutions identified, depending upon the situation. Residents should know their neighbors and their capabilities, for example, where medical assistance is available in the neighborhood. Residents should create a family plan in case family members are separated during an emergency. There should be a plan to contact family and friends outside the affected area.

Every County resident must be prepared for an emergency. County and city governments have the responsibility to make emergency preparedness a way of life. With increased awareness of the importance of preparedness, a greater portion of the population will be able to provide for themselves in an emergency. The Grand Jury recommends that an aggressive educational program on preparing for emergencies be instituted.

Short Term Sheltering

During an emergency, the officer in charge of the incident, referred to as the Incident Commander, will recommend an evacuation when it is determined that it is unsafe for the residents in a given area to remain in their homes. Examples of evacuation situations include a wildland fire threatening to engulf a neighborhood, an overturned tanker leaking hazardous material, or a flood. If the evacuation is localized to a few homes, only those residents are notified to evacuate. The incident commander can decide to evacuate a wider area. The Incident Command may shift to a higher level of authority when the incident becomes larger.

In the case of an earthquake, the structures themselves may be unsafe to occupy. As emergency personnel reach residents who are sheltering in place, the responders may condemn damaged structures and direct the residents to evacuate to a short-term shelter.

Under Federal statutes, the Red Cross is the lead agency for providing short-term shelter for residents during an emergency. In Santa Barbara County, the Sheriff's Dispatch Center notifies the Red Cross when the incident commander has ordered an evacuation. The Red Cross has an inventory of potential shelter locations from which one or more are selected based upon considerations such as the number of evacuees, the likely duration of the short-term sheltering requirement, and the safety of the site.

Emergency Sheltering

When the Red Cross dispatches volunteers to establish a shelter, a standard sequence of events occurs. After the owners of the shelter location are contacted and approve the shelter usage, the Red Cross assigns one of its people to manage the shelter. The Red Cross then begins to set up the supply line for food, water, cots, and other supplies. The incident commander is notified of the location of the shelter selected by the Red Cross, so as to notify the people who require sheltering. Each person who comes to the shelter is registered using a manual paper registration process as outlined by the Red Cross. The Grand Jury recommends that this registration data also be entered into a computer system for rapid access to registrant data and to support searches for family members who are separated.

The Social Services Department supplements the staff to operate the shelter following standard procedures that the Red Cross has developed and documented. The Red Cross assigns a shelter manager and three shift supervisors. Each supervisor is responsible for:

- registration
- shelter logistics
- food service
- disaster health services,
- special health needs including mental health
- communications within and outside the shelter
- dormitory management
- any other special needs

Staff for the shelter is recruited from many sources, including shelter residents. Shelter facilities may require services such as maintenance or installation of additional utilities. Security supervisors may be required to set rules for the shelter residents and for outside personnel. The Public Health Department provides medical assistance.

The Grand Jury has determined that the Social Services Department does not have a regularly scheduled activity to prepare its staff for this shelter operation role. The Social Services Department budget does not include an allocation for emergency planning or training. Although some of its personnel have attended Red Cross emergency training classes in the past, there is little current activity to prepare to support emergency sheltering.

The Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) includes many activities for Social Services. With a budget for emergency planning and training, Social Services could prepare an emergency plan that would cover all expected responsibilities during an emergency. Social Services should educate and train designated members of its staff including an emergency director. They should more effectively participate in area exercises with other emergency groups.

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Long Term Sheltering

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) supports long-term sheltering needs and provides financial support to those in need during a disaster. The President of the United States appoints a Federal Coordinating Office for any state that is judged officially to be affected by a disaster. The Federal Coordinating Office, in turn, establishes a Regional Field Office near the area where the disaster has occurred. This office then evaluates damages and damage claims. FEMA's involvement in a disaster is typically initiated through a chain of command starting at the local level. A request for assistance from the incident commander is sent through the County Office of Emergency Services (OES), through the State OES to the FEMA office in Sacramento.

The Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) plan includes the role of FEMA in support of emergencies within the County of Santa Barbara. The response by FEMA is on demand when the need arises. In its role as supplying financial support, FEMA might arrange and partially pay for long term sheltering, such as hotels or house trailers.

FINDINGS

Finding 1

Only a small number of the Santa Barbara County residents are prepared to shelter in place in a disaster. This means that the community as a whole will not be prepared when an emergency occurs.

Finding 2

The Red Cross provides leadership in planning for and meeting sheltering needs during an emergency. Two County agencies, Social Services and the Public Health Department, assist the Red Cross in emergency sheltering.

Finding 3

The Department of Social Services does not have an adequate budget for emergency preparedness.

Finding 4

The Department of Social Services does not adequately prepare for a disaster. Its personnel have only limited disaster preparedness training to support emergency sheltering set up by the Red Cross.

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Finding 5

Emergency shelter registration using a manual paper process limits the usefulness of the registration process, having no search, sort, or transmission capability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

The Board of Supervisors should fund an outreach and educational program designed to explain to all residents of Santa Barbara County how to survive in place in a disaster.

Recommendation 2

The Department of Social Services should request a budget allocation for emergency planning and training.

Recommendation 3

The Board of Supervisors should allocate funding for the Department of Social Services for emergency preparedness, to enable Social Services to quickly increase its preparedness for its role in disaster sheltering and to conduct joint exercises with the Red Cross on a regular basis.

Recommendation 4

The Department of Social Services should send more of their personnel to Red Cross emergency training and plan more emergency exercises in order to support the Red Cross in an emergency.

Recommendation 5

Paper registration at all shelters should be supplemented with computerized filing for rapid access to registrant data and to support searches for family members who are separated.

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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

Findings	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Recommendations	1, 3

Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services – 90 days

Findings	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Recommendations	2, 4, 5