

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY REVERSE 911®

Is Anybody Home?

SUMMARY

The 2008-09 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury report on the county's emergency communications system included findings and recommendations regarding the Reverse 911® system operated by the Sheriff's Emergency Communications Center. The findings dealt with the limited coverage of the system, English only communications and messages not being received by all who were contacted. The recommendations included: (1) informing and educating the residents of the county on the existence of the Reverse 911® system; and (2) that the system reach all residences, including those with occupants who are Spanish speaking only.

The Board of Supervisors and the Sheriff's Department responded to that 2008-09 report stating that educational programs were ongoing, that improvements to the Reverse 911® system were being made, and that Spanish language messaging was being planned.

The 2009-10 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury (Jury) found that progress was made since publication of the 2008-09 Jury report. The relatively low number of answered Reverse 911® calls is augmented by the use of many additional tools available and utilized during an emergency. However, dual language capability is yet to be fully integrated into the system. Messages in English and Spanish are sent to targeted areas only, leaving dispersed pockets of Spanish speakers with English only messages. The new on-line registration form is only in English, and elements are confusing.

BACKGROUND

The 2009-10 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury (Jury) is concerned that: (1) a relatively low percentage of households were actually being contacted during any emergency where the Reverse 911® system was implemented, and (2) messages sent were limited to English. The Jury interviewed personnel from the Sheriff's Department (Sheriff) responsible for emergency planning, visited the Regional Emergency Communication Center and interviewed other emergency response staff. The Jury also viewed a demonstration of the electronic mapping system that locates all registered telephone numbers on a county map.

GETTING THE MESSAGE THROUGH

On average, landline calls related to the five most recent incidents including the Gap, Tea and Jesusita Fires break down as follows:¹

- 19% were answered
- 30% were answered by machines
- 49% were unanswered, busy or timed out
- 1% went to businesses or fax machines
- 2% were no longer in service
- 1% were disconnected before completed

Emergency contacts can be limited due to power outages which disable cordless telephones, as happened during the Tea Fire and cellular and landline telephone systems can fail due to overloading. Ventura County, which utilizes a similar reverse 911 system, reaches 54.3% of households (answered or picked up by an answering machine or voicemail).² If the same criteria are used for Santa Barbara County 49% of households could be reached.³

Reverse 911® is not a panacea in case of emergencies. It is only one of a number of important tools that can be used during any emergency. The Sheriff utilizes the media (radio and television, both of which may interrupt scheduled programming for emergency information), print media, internet websites, internet-enabled devices, public information officers (PIOs), door to door notification, and announcements from patrol cars to inform the public of unfolding emergencies.

To supplement the Sheriff's efforts at emergency notification, the County Office of Emergency Services runs temporary information centers located in affected neighborhoods. In an attempt to keep people who answer a Reverse 911® from hanging up, the message and caller ID now indicates "Sheriff's Alert."

Telephone numbers used for the system come from either landlines or cellular telephones. The Sheriff contracts with Verizon for all 480,000 landlines within the county. Of the total county landlines, there are 3,500 changes weekly. Cell phones are registered on the Sheriff's website at <http://www.sbsheriff.org/reverse911a.html> or by calling the Sheriff's Department. About 20,000 cell phone numbers were registered during the Gap and Tea fires and almost 10,000 additional cell phones were added subsequent to the Jesusita fire.

¹ Total exceeds 100% due to rounding

² Based on 52 activations of the Ventura system.

³ The causes of unsuccessful calls are similar for both counties.

The Sheriff's Department has the ability and equipment to handle most emergency communication needs. However, if an emergency occurs which taxes the existing system, the department may employ a remote hosted site located in North Carolina, which could reach an unlimited number of households in the county.

With a grant from the Orfalea Foundation, the capacity of the Reverse 911® system has been significantly increased. The number of outgoing telephone lines expanded from 28 to 46, thereby increasing the number of possible calls per hour from 1500 to 2500. If necessary, a "mass call feature" could be employed with the ability to make 4000 calls per hour. The grant also included funding for five years of maintenance costs.

The Reverse 911® system employs electronic mapping, which allows for targeting specific geographical areas for contact and automatically dials all numbers in the designated area. The Jury viewed a demonstration of the remote computer-based mapping system at the Emergency Communications Center and witnessed the accuracy and precision by which individual telephone numbers are matched to geographic areas for quick communication. The Jury also previewed a new on-line registration portal by which county residents can register their landline and cellular telephones and locate their telephone number on a map.

DUAL LANGUAGE CAPABILITY

Emergency alerts are sent out in English and Spanish when the Sheriff determines the targeted area is one with a high percentage of Spanish only speakers. While the Jury questions the effectiveness of this method—Spanish speakers are dispersed throughout the county—the Jury was informed that other counties in the country with demographics similar to Santa Barbara utilize this method as the best now available.⁴

The Sheriff informed the Jury that a second-generation emergency alert system will be available in the near future which will have multiple language capability. Presently however, sending telephone messages that utilize electronic translation technology is found to be unreliable. The Jury was also informed that pressing one button for English and another button for Spanish is slow to set-up and often difficult to translate accurately during an emergency.

Although the Sheriff informed the Jury that on-line registration in Spanish is an option on the current web site, the Jury found only an explanatory paragraph, not the registration form, in Spanish. The Sheriff informed the Jury this oversight will be corrected and the registration process will be simplified.

⁴ Ventura and San Luis Obispo, California; City of San Antonio, Texas.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1a

The Sheriff's Department Reverse 911® system accesses all landlines in the county and in the three most recent county fire emergencies, the system reached 49% of affected households.

Finding 1b

The Sheriff's Department established an English only on-line registration form for landlines, cellular telephones and Internet access,

Recommendation 1

The Sheriff's Department revise the entire on-line registration process to allow use in both English and Spanish.

Finding 2

The Sheriff's Department Reverse 911® system currently sends emergency messages in both English and Spanish only to those areas they believe have a high concentration of Spanish speakers.

Recommendation 2

The Sheriff's Department implement a Reverse 911® emergency message system that alerts all residents of the county in both English and Spanish.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

In accordance with *Section 933.05 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:

The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department – 60 days

Findings 1a, 1b, 2

Recommendations 1, 2

The Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors – 90 days

Findings 1a, 1b, 2

Recommendations 1, 2