

SHERIFF'S OFFICE RESPONSE
SANTA BARBARA COUNTY GRAND JURY'S 2010-2011 REPORT
"IMPROVING OUR EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM IN THE 21ST CENTURY
Paul Revere - Where Are You?"

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

The present Reverse 911® emergency alert system has shortfalls in its ability to alert/inform affected residents and media under certain emergency conditions and during certain times.

Response to Finding 1: The Sheriffs Office agrees with this finding.

The Sheriffs Office recognizes that the Reverse 911® emergency alert system is but one tool that is used to notify residents in an emergency situation. Reverse 911® uses a telephonic communications method to notify residents in an emergency. Shortfalls of the Reverse 911® system include its single approach along with the simple fact that the majority of our residents appear to screen their phone calls and do not always listen to recorded messages. The Sheriffs Office utilizes a multi-pronged notification approach during emergencies in order to promptly notify residents and the media. As stated, utilization of the Reverse 911® system is only one tool in the Sheriffs Office tool kit. Response by the Sheriffs Office in times of emergency takes many forms, with Reverse 911® being only one portion of that response.

The Sheriffs Office respectfully disagrees with the statement in the report on page four "*The present backup for such a system shutdown is 'boots on the ground' knocking on doors, bullhorns, helicopters, and alerts from vehicles passing through neighborhoods.*" Such methods of notification are not a back-up, but rather are standard procedures in emergency notifications where we request our residents to perform an action during an emergency. Understanding the limitations of the Reverse 911® system, residential notifications occur in a timely manner through the use of deputies both in vehicles and at times helicopters using siren and loudspeaker to notify residents of an emergency and provide evacuation or other instructions. These are supplemented by the use of the Sheriffs Search and Rescue Team and deputies on foot knocking on doors, directly notifying residents. Furthermore, when the emergency is the responsibility of the Sheriffs Office, a Sheriffs Public Information Officer provides information to the media for dissemination to the public.

Recommendation 1a

The Board of Supervisors directs that when the Reverse 911® is activated, this system will immediately alert/inform affected residents and all media.

Response to Recommendation 1a: This recommendation will not be implemented because it is neither warranted nor reasonable.

This recommendation is directed to the Board of Supervisors (Board); however, the Grand Jury has required a response from the Sheriffs Office. The Sheriffs Office would respectfully inform the Board that it does not support this recommendation.

Most Reverse 911® sessions conducted by the Sheriffs Office do not reach the level of media attention. They are for a localized event that affects the public in a certain area. The Sheriffs

Office relies on its Public Information Officer to notify the media on Sheriff-related incidents. Reverse 911 ® is not a proper means of notifying the media.

Recommendation Ib

The Board of Supervisors directs the Office of Emergency Services to designate emergency radio/television stations to begin operation at any time the Reverse 911® is activated and reach affected residents.

Response to Recommendation Ib: This recommendation will not be implemented because it is neither warranted nor reasonable.

This recommendation is directed to the Board of Supervisors (Board); however, the Grand Jury has required a response from the Sheriff's Office. The Sheriff's Office agrees with the Office of Emergency Services' (OES) response to this recommendation as follows:

"OES would inform the Board that it does not support this recommendation. OES is proud of its strong relationship with local media. Television, radio and internet media outlets have been meeting with OES prior to the Grand Jury's report. OES and the media are working together on how to communicate effectively based on lessons learned. OES has proposed revisiting the existing memorandum of understanding (MOU) with media outlets in order to increase the number of participants and clarify responsibilities. OES' position is that all media outlets be provided information during emergencies as the public access the media outlet of their choice and preference. OES will highlight the MOU 'members' on OES' website as MOU participants have formally agreed to 'activate' their operations at the request of OES.

Reverse 9-1-1® is used for a variety of circumstances and such a broad statement as notifying the media 'any time the Reverse 9-1-1® is activated' will not be implemented. During an incident where there are threats to the public, e.g., fire, hazardous materials spill, active shooter, etcetera, it would be the intent to notify the public through parallel systems, such as the media, web sites and other emergency messaging systems, while Reverse 9-1-1® is being prepared for execution. However, activating the local media for instances in which Reverse 9-1-1® is being used to alert a neighborhood for a lost or missing person at, for example, SAM, does little to enhance response or knowledge to the situation. The Sheriff's Office has repeatedly demonstrated their partnership with the local media in situations such as the latter.

Finally, Reverse 9-1-1® is a tool not under direct control of OES. The Sheriff's Office often uses Reverse 9-1-1® in partnership with OES. However, the Sheriff's Office has also used Reverse 9-1-1® without OES' involvement; such as elderly lost residents. While the relationship between the two agencies in regard to Reverse 9-1-1® during emergencies is appropriate, it would be inappropriate to dictate to OES when it would use the resources beyond its authorities."

Finding 2

During past crises, emergency agencies have not always communicated with each other which may have slowed information being passed to affected residents.

Response to Finding 2: The Sheriffs Office partially disagrees with this finding.

The Sheriffs Office has always communicated with other agencies in emergency situations. The communication between agencies in no way affects the method or manner that information is passed to affected residents. However, the timeliness of information is always a goal for continued improvement.

Prompt and accurate communication between agencies begins in the County Public Safety Dispatch Center, where dispatchers managing Sheriff resources, county-wide AMR ambulance resources and County Fire resources get the initial call with its attendant information. Appropriate resources are then dispatched, and the dispatchers monitor every call for service for which they are responsible. They physically talk to each other about the emergency, send additional resources, or make requests of appropriate allied agencies as needed. During the entire emergency they monitor activities and assist in making sure that communication between agencies at the dispatch level is maintained. Dispatchers from the County Public Safety Dispatch Center routinely talk to other dispatchers within the county and with our neighboring counties as incidents change and jurisdictional boundaries change. The dispatchers are supplemented by deputies, fire fighters, ambulance personnel and any other personnel needed to work on a particular emergency, who consult in person, usually at a makeshift command post where an initial coordinated plan is made to detail duties and personnel in dealing with any type of emergency.

When an emergency situation goes into a long-term mode, more formal command posts are set up, Departmental Operations Centers are opened, and the Emergency Operations Center is activated. At each level, these agencies communicate with each other, often within groups of common interest.

Other factors may contribute to a lack of information being passed on to the public, or to the timeliness of that information. However, it is important to note that information disseminated to the public in an emergency must be accurate. Premature release of inaccurate information, or other errors and/or omissions in disseminated information could lead to unsafe actions by the public. Therefore, accuracy must be maintained while still providing for timeliness.

Recommendation 2

The Board of Supervisors and appropriate city jurisdictions require their respective emergency agencies to pass emergency information to adjacent jurisdictions and the Office of Emergency Services without delay.

Response to Recommendation 2: The Sheriffs Office agrees with this recommendation.

This recommendation is directed to the Board of Supervisors (Board); however, the Grand Jury has required a response from the Sheriffs Office. The Sheriffs Office would respectfully recommend to the Board that it support this recommendation.

As shown in previous responses, the Sheriffs Office passes information on to other emergency agencies and jurisdictions on a regular basis. This practice will not cease. Whether information is passed at the dispatch level, the line level, supervisory, management or executive levels, sharing emergency information is vital. Through the Sheriffs Office Public Safety Dispatch Center, protocol has been established to pass emergency information specifically to the County Office of Emergency Services.

Finding 3

No single public emergency services agency has accepted the responsibility for educating the public about the actions the public must take to access emergency service communications or what information the public can expect from various emergency alert/information systems.

Response to Finding 3: The Sheriffs Office disagrees with this finding.

The Santa Barbara County Sheriffs Office has played a major role in educating the public in this area. In addition to collaborating with OES for public information dissemination, the Sheriffs Office promotes through its website: www.sbsheriff.org information about Reverse 911®, and it informs the public regarding the registration of personal cell phones. The Sheriffs Office conducts educational programs for the public on dealing with emergency situations through its crime prevention efforts. The Sheriffs Office regularly participates in educational forums in cooperation with other public safety agencies, citizens groups and governmental entities to educate the public about the Reverse 911® system and emergency preparedness in general.

Conclusion:

The response to emergency situations by the members of the Santa Barbara County Sheriffs Office provides some of the most challenging, frightening, yet also satisfying experiences in the career of a first responder. The continuing interest shown by the Grand Jury in public and media notification during these emergency times reinforces its committed interest in public safety. The Sheriffs Office is very proud of our response to each of the wildfires noted in the report. We are confident that we will continue to work any type of emergency situation, promptly and accurately notifying those residents who are affected and providing proper instructions to keep them safe. We will continue to work closely with the media, whether through the efforts of our agency Public Information Officer or in conjunction with area wide disaster management. Such efforts could include supplying public information specialists to the responsible jurisdiction or cooperating with the Office of Emergency Services in the operation of a joint information center.

Regardless of the situation, the Santa Barbara County Sheriffs Office can be counted on to make the best use of its available resources as we protect and serve the people of Santa Barbara County.