

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Protecting Our Human Infrastructure

INTRODUCTION

The 2014-15 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) received a request to investigate the preparedness of Santa Barbara County to deal with an infectious disease emergency.

Early in 2014, the people of Western Africa were already suffering the devastation of an epidemic of Ebola Hemorrhagic Fever (Ebola). Medical care workers such as Doctors Without Borders were alerting the world medical community that this viral disease, which has no known cure or preventative vaccine and is highly contagious, could possibly reach pandemic levels in this globalized world. In September 2014, when a virulent case of Ebola presented to a Texas community hospital emergency room with a disastrous outcome, a frightened American public began to question the preparedness of their national and local public health systems.

BACKGROUND

During the Jury's initial contact with the medical and administrative staff of the Santa Barbara Public Health Department (SBPHD), it learned there exists a well-established coalition of public and private health care providers. This coalition is a multi-tiered communication system reaching from the national Centers for Disease Control to the California State Department of Health (CSDH) to the 58 county public health departments to every licensed private health care provider. The CSDH ensures the readiness of each local county health department by requiring an annual simulation drill which tests the strengths and weakness of all components of the department. Each department designates the area of focus for the drill, plans, executes, and evaluates the actual operation. An after-action report to the CSDH must be submitted within 90 days of the simulation. The focal point of this collaborative team effort is to ensure all necessary resources are available to the public and first responders are properly trained.

Wisely, in early August, the SBPHD heeded the alert from the world health community and decided to develop their simulation drill against the threat of a local Ebola infection. Focusing their attention on this goal, the SBPHD tested its preparedness during a four-hour drill in mid-November 2014. Members of the Jury were invited to observe the entire activity and were given access to view the use of communication technology in partnership with their local private health care providers and private service contractors.

The drill plan designed by the SBPHD created the Department Operation Center (DOC) and an Ebola Response Team (ERT). The DOC was comprised of five components: (1) Incident Command, (2) Operations, (3) Planning, (4) Logistics, and (5) Fiscal. Each component had defined roles, responsibilities, and a chain of command. Public and private partners such as

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American Medical Response (AMR), all area hospitals, medical laboratories, fire agencies including hazmat teams, law enforcement, ServiceMaster, and animal control all participated. A staff member from the Santa Barbara County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) observed the entire drill.

METHODOLOGY

The Jury had separate interviews with SBPHD officials including the Medical Director. Some Jurors were designated official observers at the annual drill conducted by the Department at their location at 300 San Antonio Road. These observers were invited to speak with some of the participating agencies regarding their specific roles, responsibilities, and contributions in this infectious disease exercise. Additionally, the Jury visited the SBPHD website, <http://www.countyofsb.org/phd> for the most recent infectious disease control guidelines.

OBSERVATIONS

These state-required annual simulations are designed to build organizational resiliency against public health catastrophic events. The focus of this year's effort was to test the SBPHD and their public/private partners' readiness to handle a symptomatic Ebola patient in our community while maintaining the safety of the health care workers and the general public.

Immediately following the simulation, each component of the DOC reported to all the participants the most prominent concern identified by their area of the operation. Not surprisingly, most reported their need for better communication lines and upgrades to existing software and technology. Several weeks following the drill, the Jury was able to study the SBPHD's preliminary after-action report which identified more specific needs for strengthening their infectious disease preparedness plans.

The following are some areas of concern for specific improvement and some remediation that has been completed or is in progress:

Logistics: Computers lacked standard software and easy access to DOC files. Information Technology (IT) will update DOC computers and ensure access to the necessary data.

Command: Hotlines for the "worried well" were established, but adequacy was questioned. The Public Information Officer identified additional call centers in other County departments and in the Public Information Officer room (Joint Information Center) at the County EOC. Video conferences with Santa Barbara, Goleta Valley, and Santa Ynez Valley Cottage hospitals worked well. There is a need to test video conference capability with all hospitals in the County.

Ebola Response Team: Additionally, more Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) was required. A shipment received in December provided an adequate supply. They need more ERT members. SBPHD has successfully recruited adequate volunteers who will participate in PPE meetings and response role training.

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Field Operations: County Animal Services was not prepared for the initial response. This Department will be incorporated in the plan to provide decontamination services and quarantine of any exposed animals.

Emergency Medical Services: AMR needs a Sheriff/city police or California Highway Patrol escort for their Ebola-equipped ambulance. SBPHD is working with these law enforcement agencies to establish a standard operation plan for scene security and escort to the appropriate hospital.

CONCLUSION

The value of the annual drills by the Santa Barbara Public Health Department (SBPHD) is reflected in the effectiveness of its staff, the adequacy of its equipment, and its solid relationship with public and private health care partners. This repeated planning for risk develops a level of redundancy in an organization that is critical to its resiliency in the face of any catastrophic challenge.¹

The Jury encourages the public to maintain their personal awareness of all health alerts issued by the SBPHD through the local print and broadcast media, on the Department's website at <http://www.countyofsb.org/phd>, follow Twitter @SBCPublic Health or Facebook: Santa Barbara County Public Health Department. For consultation or self-reporting of a suspected infectious disease, call the County Health Officer on the 24/7 phone line at (805) 681-5280.

The 2014-15 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury is confident that the infectious disease preparedness plans established by the Santa Barbara Public Health Department are adequate and ready for implementation when needed.

Under *California Penal Code Section 933.05* this report does not require a response.

¹ Rodin, Judith. *The Resilience Dividend; Being strong in a world where things go wrong*. New York: Public Affairs, 2014.