

ARE WE READY FOR THE BIG ONE?
EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS IN MENDOCINO COUNTY
A Report on Emergency Preparedness Training in Mendocino County

April 5, 2007

Summary

The Grand Jury studied the County's state of emergency preparedness due to a heightened awareness of the consequences of a major catastrophe. Major hurdles remain to be overcome in the area of training, though some progress is being made. Principal concerns are the lack of funds and personnel to expedite development of a County-wide specific emergency plan which expands the existing generic plan. Training of response personnel is essential to ensure an efficient and comprehensive response organization.

Background

The 2006/2007 Grand Jury elected to study the structural changes in emergency services to determine whether the new system would provide the maximum level of preparedness. The goal of the emergency response system is to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a major disaster.

The Grand Jury was alerted to a change in the management and structure of emergency services by two factors:

- 1.) The dissolution of Mendocino Emergency Services Agency (MESA)
- 2.) The modification of Mendocino County Code Chapter 7.04 (Title 7).

For this purpose, the Grand Jury examined three areas essential to Emergency Preparedness, namely:

- Training;
- Communications;
- Coordination.

This report will be directed toward the first item: Training

Essential to understanding training is a knowledge of the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS), the Federal Government's National Incident Management System (NIMS), and Incident Command System (ICS).

ICS was the standard model for responding to emergencies at the time a major fire occurred in the hills above Oakland, California in the early '90s. ICS addresses how the personnel on scene are organized to deal with the problems they encounter. Among the key lessons learned from the Oakland fire was that personnel at all levels of response must be trained to work under the same

system, for which ICS alone proved inadequate. The result was SEMS, a statewide standard for emergency response. More recently this idea has been further developed by the federal government under the umbrella of NIMS. ICS continues to be the model for all emergency personnel on scene. Now, in conjunction with NIMS and SEMS, all levels of training are addressed.

Methods

The Grand Jury interviewed former MESA staff, county managers, elected officials, school and special district personnel. The Grand Jury studied county and city emergency plans as distributed in the Fall of 2006, audits, budgets, county documents, State and Federal requirements and laws, attended public meetings, and Board of Supervisors' sessions and workshops.

Findings

1. MESA, a Joint Powers Agency between the County of Mendocino and the incorporated cities, was established in 1996.
2. MESA was operationally shut down part way through 2005.
3. On February 13, 2006, the MESA organization was dissolved. The responsibilities reverted to the County of Mendocino on July 1, 2006.
4. Expert testimony emphasizes that extensive planning and training reduces errors and chaos during disasters.
5. Title 7 includes but is not limited to the following:
 - establishes SEMS, NIMS, and ICS as the means of effectively preparing for, responding to, and recovering from emergencies in Mendocino County.
 - specifies the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) as Director of Emergency Services, and the Mendocino County Sheriff as Assistant Director of Emergency Services.
 - creates the position of Emergency Services Coordinator for the County of Mendocino and the Mendocino County Operational Area.
 - defines the Mendocino County Operational Area as consisting of the County and all political subdivisions within the County area, including cities, special districts, and school districts.
6. The Emergency Services Coordinator's many duties include coordinating or providing required training in SEMS, NIMS, and ICS. Some other responsibilities are researching, applying for, and administering emergency services and homeland security grants.
7. A requirement for maximum Federal and/or State reimbursement for disaster-related damages is documented training in and compliance with, SEMS, NIMS, and ICS.
8. The Emergency Services Coordinator has no budgeted staff.
9. A previous Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) was approved in 1973. A plan was proposed in 1996, but not approved. The Board of Supervisors approved

the current EOP in October of 2006. The plan is consistent with SEMS, NIMS, and ICS.

10. The current EOP was developed by a private consultant to meet State requirements.
11. In response to a Grand Jury questionnaire, several county department managers replied they were not consulted during the plan's development; several did not know that a plan had been approved.
12. There is presently no centralized tracking system to record the training of Mendocino County employees and elected officials in SEMS or NIMS.
13. Each county department is required to develop an Emergency Action Plan, which determines how a department will respond to a local emergency. The departments are also required to train their staff in the Emergency Action Plan, as well as SEMS and NIMS, and maintain the associated compliance records.
14. Some county departments have not met the required levels of preparedness training.
15. Under California State Government Code §3100, county employees are required to respond to local disasters.
16. First response authorities (e.g. fire and law enforcement) have specific training for dealing with various levels of emergency situations in accordance with their department's equipment and protocols.
17. The Mendocino County Public Health Department conducted training for health related emergencies and situational drills funded under Federal grants.
18. Funds are not available to provide disaster training involving multiple departments unless specific grants are received,
19. Some volunteer groups have organized as Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT), a community-based preparedness and response system. The State of California provides training for these teams. A related program is the Student Emergency Response Team, which has only recently begun training.
20. In addition to CERT, several grassroots groups have organized and trained throughout the county, to assist themselves in the event of a local disaster.
21. Mendocino County department heads and the BOS received Emergency Operations Center (EOC) training in November 2006, organized by the Emergency Services Coordinator.
22. In November, 2006, Mendocino County Office of Education (MCOE) designated an Emergency Coordinator. Under a program offered by the MCOE Emergency Coordinator, 22 school employees received emergency training.
23. The Grant paying for the current MCOE Emergency Coordinator expires in June 2007.
24. In the event of a major disaster, populations from other areas may be relocated to Mendocino County stressing already scarce resources. Everyday emergencies in other counties often involve Mendocino County resources.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. the EOP be reviewed and discussed by all departments, and amended to include specific plans for the most likely emergencies. (Findings 9-11)
2. a schedule of exercises for key emergency response staff be developed to identify and validate necessary systems and equipment in the event of a large scale emergency. (Findings 4-7, 12-22)
3. the County Emergency Coordinator be given resources to develop a comprehensive and detailed database of key staff training to demonstrate compliance with SEMS, NIMS, and ICS. (Findings 7, 8, 15)
4. time and money be allocated to insure that all staff mentioned in the EOP are aware of their role and trained to function effectively. (Findings 4-6, 8, 11, 13-15, 18, 24)
5. the Fire Chief's Association develop a program to monitor and support the CERT and grassroots response groups. (Findings 19, 20)
6. the County locate and secure funding to support training of CERT groups. (Finding 19)
7. funds be located to continue the MCOE Emergency Coordinator position. (Finding 22, 23)

Comments

The EOP, a generic plan, needs modification to meet the particular needs of this County. To maintain the plan's relevance the EOP must be periodically reviewed.

Records of staff training are currently maintained in each County department. Without a central database it's not possible to insure that all necessary participants are trained to the appropriate level and will be able to function in a cooperative manner.

The very nature, geography, and remoteness of communities in this county makes it challenging to prepare for and deal with hazardous situations. The extensive training needed for emergencies, unless funded by Federal grants, is rarely considered a priority. Training in general is the most often cut budget item when county government is seeking funding for politically valuable programs.

County government's major responsibility is the safety and protection of its population. This County needs to make emergency and disaster preparedness a priority.

Response Required

Emergency Services Coordinator (Findings 5-14, 18-20, 24; Recommendations 1-6)

Chief Executive Office (Findings 5, 8-10, 13-14, 18; Recommendations 1-6)
Board of Supervisors (Findings 7-9, 15, 19-20, 24; Recommendations 1, 3, 4, 6)
Mendocino County Sheriff's Office (Findings 4-5, 14, 16, 19-21, 24;
Recommendations 1, 2, 4)
County Counsel (Findings 5, 6, 15)
Fire Chief's Association (Recommendation 5)
Mendocino County Office of Education (Findings 22-23; Recommendation 7)

Response Requested

Health & Human Services Agency (Findings 13, 17-18; Recommendations 2, 4)