

Meeting the Care and Shelter Mandate through Improvements in Training and Communication

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Mateo and Sonoma counties both have plans in place for human services to meet the state mandate to provide care and shelter services to residents displaced by disasters. Incidents requiring care and shelter response occur much more frequently in San Mateo County than in Sonoma County. As a result, the San Mateo Human Services Agency (SMHSA) program is more thoroughly developed, tested, and vetted than that of the Sonoma County Human Services Department (SCHSD), and provides two strong areas worthy of emulation: training and communication. The success of the SMHSA program is due in part to the requirement that all staff,

regardless of job classification, are regularly trained and exercised in incident command, disaster service worker and emergency shelter operations, and personal preparedness. The successful communication plan of SMHSA also involves implementation of an automated call down system and a robust radio communications program. Enhancement of SCHSD training and communication programs could improve the operational organization and functionality of SCHSD care and shelter planning, and improve overall emergency response in advance of an inevitable large-scale disaster.

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Overview

In the state of California, county governments are mandated to provide emergency care and shelter services to displaced populations. San Mateo County Human Services Agency (SMHSA) and Sonoma County Human Services Department (SCHSD) are responsible for developing and implementing care and shelter service programs for their respective counties. Both departments have plans in place to provide emergency care and shelter services—however, the SMHSA program is more frequently activated and tested and has a stronger communication component, providing several areas that could benefit SCHSD planning and response. The more effective agencies are at training and communicating with their staff, the faster and more efficiently services can be provided to displaced populations.

Initial Comparisons

Both San Mateo and Sonoma counties enjoy similar mild climates, spectacular and varied geography with coastal beaches, redwood forests, rolling hills, and pockets of thriving urban populations. Despite these physical similarities, the population patterns of the two counties differ dramatically, and result in very different needs for care and shelter planning as well as significant variations in actual disaster incidents and subsequent response.

Census data indicates Sonoma County has a population of 483,878 residents that, while 33% smaller than the population of San Mateo, live in an area that is 351% larger and contains 9 incorporated cities compared to 20 in San Mateo.¹ Looking at total population and land area, San Mateo has an overall

population density greater than Sonoma County, but population density is significantly greater within San Mateo's heavily populated urban areas. Looking only at the two largest cities in each county, Santa Rosa with 4,063.90 persons per square mile and San Mateo's Daly City with 13,194.50 persons per square mile, it is evident that San Mateo packs a lot more people into a lot less space.² The result is more multi-unit housing (increasing the probability of displacement of large numbers of people due to fires) and more people overall to potentially evacuate and/or shelter and feed when large-scale incidents occur.

This disparity manifests with predictable frequency. San Mateo experiences large-scale events that require response from SMHSA to provide care and shelter services several times per year; recent events include apartment fires, a tsunami, and an airline crash. Sonoma County, conversely, has not had a regional activation since the New Year's floods of 2005/2006.

As a result of more frequent events, the SMHSA program has had opportunity to be more thoroughly developed, tested, and vetted than the SCHSD program. As such, it highlights several potential areas that could improve the operational organization and functionality of SHSD care and shelter planning and overall emergency response in advance of a large-scale disaster—specifically in the areas of training and communication.

Launch of San Mateo's Program

In 2010, the city of San Bruno experienced a devastating natural gas pipeline explosion in a residential community. SMHSA had plans in place to guide

the response of staff to tend to the care and shelter of displaced residents, but when the agency initiated its response, it became apparent that the plans and contact lists were out of date, staff were not adequately trained or prepared, and response procedures needed modernization.

Upon review of the after-action report, management realized that this event “was a big deal in a small place and that a 6.9 (earthquake) will be a big deal in a big place—and we’re not ready.”

SMHSA procured funding to hire and train an emergency response coordinator to organize the department’s care and shelter response and facilitate staff and department emergency training and communication. The creation of this dedicated position quickly resulted in positive improvements to the department’s training and communication and as such, SMHSA expanded the unit to include an additional half-time emergency response coordinator and invested in an automated call-down system and a robust radio communications program.

Successful Program Elements

Although Sonoma County does not have as dense of an urban population and does not experience the frequency and scope of disasters that San Mateo County experiences, the presence of several active fault lines in Sonoma County, and a history of weather-related disasters, ensures that a large-scale regional disaster requiring SCHSD care and shelter response is inevitable.

SCHSD does have training and communication plans in place for care and shelter and emergency response, however there is room for improvement to ensure that staff are prepared as private individuals as well as department employees so that services to the public can experience as little interruption as possible. This can be achieved by improving elements of training and communication in areas where SMHSA has illustrated a strong program.

Training

One of the strengths of the SMHSA program is that it trains staff to be generalists instead of specialists so that staff can fill almost any unmet staffing need during an event response, regardless of which “assigned” individuals are able to be present. SMHSA illustrates that training builds confidence and the more staff can practice, the more their confidence builds and their real-world response improves.

In addition to classroom training, SMHSA holds and participates in regular tabletop and functional exercises. As mentioned, San Mateo also experiences relatively frequent incidents that require activation of its emergency response and care and shelter plans. Each tabletop exercise, functional exercise, and real world event response serves as a training and learning opportunity that SMHSA then uses to further improve training and update procedures to streamline efficiency. This then enables SMHSA to respond in a timely manner, both independently and in collaboration with multiple jurisdictions, aiding in its ability to more effectively serve clients, especially those most at risk in a disaster.

The SMHSA emergency management program requires that all staff, regardless of job classification, are routinely trained and exercised in three core areas: incident command system, disaster service worker responsibilities (including emergency shelter operations), and personal preparedness.

Incident Command System (ICS)

Incident Command System (ICS) is a standardized management system with a uniform organizational structure and vocabulary developed to enable all levels of government—federal, state, local, and tribal—the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations, to work effectively and efficiently together to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters, regardless of cause, size, or complexity. ICS includes procedures for controlling personnel, facilities, equipment, and communications, and is designed to be used for the entire duration of the incident. Most significantly, ICS presents a common

terminology using “plain language” and uniform management structure to reduce redundancy and misunderstandings during disaster response. Nearly all agencies involved in emergency response utilize the ICS structure.

It is important to train staff in ICS because both the Department Operations Center (DOC) and County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) are built on this management system structure, and all staff responding to a disaster, regardless of assignment, will do so through one of these organizational systems. Understanding the structure and vocabulary of ICS will enable staff to respond more quickly to meet the care and shelter needs of displaced populations, per state mandate.

SCHSD does provide an introductory training in ICS during new employee orientation, but it would benefit staff and the department to expand on this training and to exercise the ICS, and DOC structure, with more regularity.

Disaster Service Worker Responsibilities and Emergency Shelter Operations

Government code §3100 states that all public employees are disaster service workers tasked with protecting and preserving the health, safety, lives, and property of people during emergencies. During a disaster, employees may be held over at their work site or sent to another location, not released to return home for several hours, and can be required to perform duties outside their normal job classification.

For any human services agency, disaster service worker tasks generally support the emergency care and shelter mandate. Both SMHSA and SCHSD provide care and shelter services in collaboration with county Emergency Services, the American Red Cross, and other community agencies. Staff serving as disaster service workers may be assigned to tasks related to shelter operations including food distribution, emergency benefits, or other duties as assigned.

Any shelters open within the County of Sonoma will be operated by the American Red Cross (ARC) per a memorandum of understanding between the county and the ARC. While the county may not

independently manage a shelter, SCHSD is expected to provide additional staff to help support unmet staffing needs ARC may encounter at any point during an emergency. As such, department staff are trained in the basic elements of shelter management and operations including opening a shelter, managing and staffing a shelter, feeding shelter residents, procuring shelter supplies, and assisting clients with access and functional needs.

SCHSD maintains a list of staff who have received shelter operations training, however the training has not been offered for 6 years and many of those staff have retired and their replacements are untrained. SCHSD does train employees on the requirements of being a disaster service worker during new employee orientation, but it would be beneficial to reiterate this requirement more regularly so if a disaster strikes, the requirement to serve, often outside of normal job duties, should cause less disruption and be less of a surprise.

Personal Preparedness

In order for staff to be able to quickly respond as disaster service workers and provide care and shelter services to displaced populations, staff must ensure that their own homes and families are as prepared as possible so that staff can come to work instead of needing to be at home, or otherwise worried about what is happening at home.

The American Red Cross recommends three steps for personal emergency preparedness: make a plan as a first step toward a calmer and more assured disaster response; get a kit with enough supplies for everyone in the household for at least three days; and be informed by learning basic first aid and CPR/AED skills

SMHSA provides quality disaster “go” kits to aid managers in their ability to respond, with the idea that if staff have a set of supplies on hand, they can be held over at the worksite to resume or maintain client services instead of having to leave to tend to their personal needs. Staff are also encouraged to create their own personal kits. Additionally, the property managers in leased buildings provide trailers stocked

with disaster supplies for staff who may be kept over at their site during a disaster.

SCHSD provides basic training on personal preparedness during all new employee orientations, and implemented a 26-week disaster preparedness program that sends out weekly emails with suggestions for supplies to assemble and tasks to perform to prepare individuals and families for disaster. This format breaks a daunting task into manageable bits with the hope that more staff will move in the direction of personal preparedness and subsequently be more available to serve as disaster service workers.

Communication

SMHSA has made significant improvements to its internal communication structures by implementing an automated call-down system and investing in a radio program to communicate internally as well as between jurisdictions.

SMC-ALERT COMMUNICATION

SMC-Alert is a web-based program with which an administrator can send mass emails and/or text messages, effectively communicating with staff and providing them a uniform message. With the program, documents can be attached to the messages, and administration can confirm that messages were received. SMHSA requires staff to self-enroll and to maintain their own personal contact information in the system. Administrators manage several communication groups and messages dependent upon size, scope, duration, and extent of an emergency.

SCHSD maintains an emergency contact roster of supervisors and managers, however communication is dependent upon the department reaching out to staff to update contact information; and during an event, manually calling each individual phone number, waiting for a response and/or leaving a message. Current email groups are dependent on staff having access to work email away from the office. With a system such as SMC-Alert, all staff could update their own personal contact information with their communication methods of choice, and

simultaneously receive emails and/or text messages with important information regarding the status of an event, instructions for how and where to respond, or sources for assistance. Streamlined communication between the department and staff could significantly improve the speed and efficiency with which routine client services and emergency care and shelter services are provided.

RADIO COMMUNICATION

In order to facilitate communication within SMHSA, between SMHSA and shelters, and between SMHSA and other agencies, a radio program was developed including amateur and trunked radio systems. Each SMHSA building has the ability to communicate, even when telephone and computer systems are inoperable, thus reducing the probability that client services will be interrupted. Several staff have been assigned a radio, which allows them to be contacted when phones are inoperable or non-functioning and also to facilitate communication between large groups of staff simultaneously.

SMHSA purchased radios with a grant from the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI), and has a robust drilling and maintenance program to ensure effective and efficient use of this valuable resource.

SCHSD should evaluate whether or not the ability to communicate between buildings and/or the EOC could impact the ability to maintain client services and ensure staff safety. The cost of investment in a radio system should be weighed against the frequency of large-scale disasters and the potential impact of not being able to communicate during events of this scope.

Conclusion and Recommendations

SCHSD has a number of program elements already in place, including an existing care and shelter committee, a care and shelter plan, positive working relationships with multiple response agencies and jurisdictions, and a personal preparedness program facilitated by a full-time safety coordinator. In light of the success of the SMHSA program, however, room for improvement becomes apparent.

In order for SCHSD staff to provide care and shelter services as efficiently as possible, staff should be regularly trained and exercised in three significant areas: ICS, disaster service worker and emergency shelter responsibilities, and personal preparedness. The department should also work toward updating and modernizing its communication systems by implementing an automated call down system and considering investment in a radio communication system.

Enhancement and enforcement of training and communication in Sonoma County could improve the operational organization and functionality of SCHSD care and shelter planning, and improve overall emergency response in advance of an inevitable large-scale disaster.

Improvements in training would require modest financial investment as a department safety coordinator position is already in place, albeit a position that is spread rather thin with current duties and responsibilities to meet existing mandates. If an increase in formal training and exercises are to be undertaken, it would be prudent to consider adding either another safety staff member, or provide for dedicated administrative support.

Implementation of an automated call down system should be researched and evaluated as a priority. Regardless of how trained staff are, client services will be delayed if staff cannot be contacted quickly and efficiently during a disaster. A system such as SMC Alert could streamline communication between the department and staff with relative ease. Initial steps toward implementing an automated call down system should be coordinated with the county Fire and Emergency Services and Risk Management departments, as there are multiple county departments likely impacted by the same requirements and restrictions.

Initiation of a radio communications program would require substantially more investment in research, funding, and maintenance. The project could be developed anywhere along a variety of scales, and would involve an investment in equipment, licensing, infrastructure, training, and maintenance.

Additional research would be required to determine the specific types of radios that would be most beneficial to be used by SHSD. Individual analog, conventional, or trunked radios with accessories range from several hundred to several thousand dollars. Additional infrastructure would need to be added, including antennas built into each building for additional cost and maintenance. The project could be researched and conducted in collaboration with the county Information Systems Department (ISD) and the county Fire and Emergency Services Department, both of which have ample experience with projects of the this scope.

Every emergency management plan can be improved by regular training and a strong communications component. If SCHSD builds on the strong principles established by SMHSA, it will result in more efficient and effective care and shelter services to displaced populations during disaster.

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References

1. 2010 Census data for Sonoma County <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06097.html> and San Mateo County <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06081.html>
2. 2010 Census data for Santa Rosa <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0670098.html> and Daly City <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0617918.html>