

# San Mateo County Human Services Agency: Emergency Planning and Response

SHANE BALANON

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) plays a significant role in emergency response and management in regards to the handling of issues related to mass care and shelter for the City and County of San Francisco. Unlike other jurisdictions, the City and County of San Francisco is afforded the luxury of avoiding the bureaucracy of multiple municipalities within the county, and therefore remains unhindered by competing jurisdictions in developing its emergency response plan. This is not to suggest the absence of collaboration between governmental agencies, community-based organizations, or public input in the overall development of its emergency plan. Various governmental departments and organizations, including but not limited

to the Human Services Agency, Department of Public Health (DPH), Department of Emergency Management (DEM), and the American Red Cross (ARC), are integral in implementing San Francisco's emergency plan as all are charged with specific tasks to meet the needs of those affected and the surrounding neighborhoods during a disaster.

The purpose of this paper is to review the San Mateo Department Operations Center (DOC), and to suggest particular components that might be adopted and potentially incorporated into SFHSA's effort to make its emergency response more efficient and effective. In addition, this paper recommends how to improve SFHSA's response to smaller scale emergencies.

---

**Shane Balanon, Shelter Plus Care Program Manager,  
San Francisco Human Services Agency**



# San Mateo County Human Services Agency: Emergency Planning and Response

SHANE BALANON

## Introduction

### SAN MATEO COUNTY

San Mateo County is roughly 740 square miles, with a population of 720,000. A number of watercourses drain the eastern part of the county, and streams drain the western part of the county. Many of the streams originate along the northern Santa Cruz Mountains and run through the county. The county includes twenty incorporated cities and twenty unincorporated communities. There are eight major highways and two bridges that run through the county.

San Mateo County's emergency response plan is emphasized and administered through their Department Operations Center (DOC), located in the city of Belmont. The DOC provides structure including instructions for various hazards and disasters. Because of the size and geography of San Mateo County, the emergency plan focuses on unincorporated areas and the county's responsibility to provide care and shelter to those communities.

The DOC includes:

1. Identification of primary and secondary DOC activators. It identifies the county's primary activators responsible for determining mobilization of an emergency response and activation of the DOC. The county also identifies secondary activators responsible for activating the DOC in the event primary activators are unable. Additional staff may be included, but do not have authority to activate the DOC.
2. The "DOC Activation Checklist" references the severity of an incident, and includes "small, moderate, and major" events. The checklist may be activated at the discretion of the DOC primary activator when the following criteria are met: a) the incident is severe and/or escalating, will extend to multiple operational periods, and will require activation for multiple shelter sites; b) the incident will require simultaneous, combined operational control for both multiple shelter operations and continuity operations.
3. DOC maps and layouts provide a simple birds-eye view of the DOC layout. Each section (Command, Operations, Planning, Logistics, and Financial/Administration) are segmented and color-coded for simple identification. Equipment and phone numbers are clearly identified.
4. Technology and equipment instructions provide the necessary information on setting up and utilizing computers, printers, copiers, telephones, fax machines, and radios.

5. Security and safety protocols require staff to check-in with Finance/Administration when entering the DOC, and instruct assigned staff to retrieve bins and set-up the DOC for utilization. The protocols also ensure all equipment are accounted for and functioning.
6. DOC and Emergency Operations Center (EOC) phone directories that include contact information of the EOCs in other cities within San Mateo County.
7. Storeroom inventory simply provides the location in which equipment is to be retrieved and stored. It also includes an equipment inventory to sufficiently prepare your operations.

In addition, the county stresses the importance of emergency and disaster trainings for all employees. As a condition of employment, all San Mateo HSA employees are required to complete the Disaster Service Worker Orientation, which provides an overview of staff roles in an emergency or disaster. Employees are also required to participate in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trainings that include Incident Command System (ICS) courses 100/700, which provide an overview of the national standardized organizational structure for all incident responses. ICS consists of a standard management hierarchy, and procedures for managing temporary incidents of any size. ICS procedures should be pre-established and sanctioned by collaborative authorities.

The Red Cross Shelter Partner Training provides the basics of shelter operations from experts in the field. The primary mission is ensuring employees are aware of their roles in providing care and shelter to disaster victims in an emergency. The county works in collaboration with the Office of Emergency Services, ARC, and other community-based organizations. All employees may be assigned to various tasks related to that mission, including shelter operations, food distribution and other benefits.

Personal Preparedness Training has been developed to ensure staff and their families are prepared for when an emergency or disaster strikes. It stresses

three important reminders: 1) make a plan, including developing a communication plan, deciding where to meet, determining escape routes, and reviewing and practicing said plan regularly; 2) prepare or get a kit, including obtaining the basic essentials for 72-hours, such as water, non-perishable food, flashlights, batteries, maps, and a first aid kit; and 3) be informed, including learning how to protect yourself and family, practicing safety in the event of an emergency or disaster, and knowledge of how to retrieve information.

Management and supervisors are strongly encouraged to participate in trainings at more advanced levels of ICS and/or Shelter Management. As many managerial and supervisory staff will be assigned to leadership roles, staff must be aware of and prepared for their responsibilities in relation to the DOC, EOC, and the general public.

#### **CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO**

San Francisco is the only consolidated city and county in California. It is roughly 47 square miles with a population of 815,000. It is the most densely settled large city in California, and the second most densely populated major city in the United States. Two major highways and two bridges serve San Francisco.

The City and County of San Francisco maintains and executes its procedures in the event of emergency responses. Citywide departments are assigned to specific tasks relevant to their department. The San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) is responsible for mass care and shelter.

The majority of SFHSA emergency responses are smaller scale fire responses. Emergency response coordinators carry a pager linked to the San Francisco City and County fire dispatch at the Emergency Operations Center. The pager signals all fire alarms, from first-alarm through four-alarm. SFHSA determines the necessity to respond under the following criteria:

1. Three-alarm fire or higher;
2. The location is in an area associated with poverty and/or low-income housing (e.g. buildings

- known to be associated with city contracts, or specific areas in San Francisco with a plethora of low-income clients and supportive housing);
3. Weather, especially when the weather might be detrimental to the physical well-being of those affected.

SFHSA works in collaboration with the American Red Cross to obtain client information related, but not limited, to household composition, age of clients, public benefits received, possible associated housing subsidies, medication and medical needs, and other special needs requested and/or required by clients. In addition to collecting client information, SFHSA outreaches to the building owner/landlord to solicit insurance information, tenant information, and addresses. SFHSA will also work with the Department of Building Inspection and PG&E in the event clients may be able to re-occupy their units.

Non-confidential information retrieved at the scene of the emergency is shared with the Department of Emergency Management (DEM). DEM is the identified centralized department to which information is submitted and then reported citywide.

An on-site assessment will be conducted to determine the need to open an emergency shelter and offer affected clients hotel vouchers, which are funded by the ARC for three days and then matched by SFHSA for an additional three days when necessary. SFHSA collaborates with the Department of Parks and Recreation to identify the location of and duration for which a shelter will be in operation. Shelter staffing will be jointly determined between SFHSA and ARC. In determining the need to open an emergency shelter, SFHSA will assess the number of displaced clients, extent of the building damage, approximate timeline of when the building may be habitable, type of building (e.g. SRO hotel, apartment, single-family home, duplex, etc), weather, perceived functional abilities of the clients, pet issues, time of day, and the availability of resources. In addition, placing clients into hotels may not be financially feasible considering the number of emergencies to which SFHSA might respond.

## Proposal

All City and County of San Francisco employees, as designated Disaster Service Workers, have a responsibility to respond to an emergency if called upon. However, in smaller scale emergencies, only identified staff are required to respond. These staff are required to be available 24-hours a day, respond to emergencies, provide ongoing assistance, search for housing alternatives, and follow the current emergency through until the needs of clients have been met.

During the initial period following an emergency in which clients are vouchered in hotels or placed in an emergency shelter, ARC staff are available to provide clients guidance, referrals, and recommendations. Clients placed in a temporary placement have already been assessed by ARC and have been deemed vulnerable or need of more attention (e.g. might not have relatives available, might need case management, medical, or other necessary resources to stabilize themselves).

Although emergencies may be similar in nature, no emergency is the ever same. The severity of each emergency may require a different level of response. It is imperative that SFHSA has sufficient, trained full-time staff to allow for a more efficient and effective response to all emergencies.

Staff will be responsible for emergency response as well as case managing clients through the duration of their temporary placement. As of today, ARC is available for three days following an emergency, and then all clients are transferred to SFHSA for follow through. Proposed staff will be assigned to case managing clients to:

1. Assist with short- and long-term planning;
2. Search for housing;
3. Negotiate with potential landlords;
4. Solicit other housing through community-based and government-funded programs, and secure security deposits;
5. Communicate with their current landlord to retrieve property;
6. Escort clients to appointments;

7. Assist with applying or enrolling in public benefits or wait lists; and
8. Respond to general inquiries

Past SFHSA experience with emergency response has resulted in many requests from clients. Experience has proven that some clients may not have income or medical assistance, and may not know the procedures for applying for government benefits. SFHSA staff familiar with benefits offered by the agency (e.g. CAAP, Medi-Cal) would be able to facilitate enrolling clients into programs. Staff would also be responsible for enrolling clients into other services, including long-term case management offered by various community-based organizations. Enrolling clients in said programs would result in specialized services to better meet the needs of the client.

## Conclusion

Considering the size, jurisdictions, and layers of staffing that comprise San Mateo County, its emergency response plan is clearly understood, underscoring the roles and responsibilities within the DOC. Emphasizing the need for alternative staff with the knowledge and experience to respond to an emergency is imperative to successfully ensuring that the needs of clients and county are met. More importantly, assigning appropriate staff to specific positions and rotating responsibilities ensures staff are aware of the duties of all emergency responder positions.

Unfortunately, emergencies do not always go according to script, and no emergency is the same. SFHSA is committed to responding to all emergencies, small, moderate, or large in scale. With the possibility of staffing turnover, SFHSA must continue to update its emergency response plan and continuously train staff, including management and front line staff. Hands-on exercises to simulate an emergency can only benefit staff in the event of an actual emergency.

As stated earlier, the current SFHSA response team includes two full-time staff. Additional staff would solidify SFHSA's ability to better and more confidently respond to emergencies. Additional

staffing will assist clients in a time that is most precarious and challenging. Clients may need the assistance, guidance, and recommendation of SFHSA staff and other agencies working collectively with a goal of helping clients regain a sense of normalcy.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Rex Andrea, San Mateo Emergency Response Coordinator, who graciously offered his time, knowledge and expertise. Mr. Andrea addressed questions, provided insight, and provided a tour of San Mateo's DOC. I wish him and San Mateo continued success in the implementation and development of future emergency response procedures. I would also like to thank Trent Rhorer, Steve Arcelona, Joyce Crum, and Daryl Higashi of the San Francisco Human Services Agency for their continued support.