

Sonoma County Innovations in Mass Care Response: Building Efficient Response Through an Employee-Centered Approach

DORIS PADILLA BARONE, MPA, CEM

CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last five years, emergency managers and human services practitioners have seen a dramatic increase in large-scale wildfires in Northern California and across the state. These complex and deadly events require a rapid and well-coordinated mass care/human services response to ensure residents evacuate, shelter, connect to resources, and recover. Through the work of the Human Services Department (HSD) and its dedicated staff, Sonoma County has developed and continually refined its response strategies by actively engaging

employees and seeking recommendations on how to better support and prepare staff for response. By engaging in an employee-centered improvement process, Sonoma has moved closer to helping employees adopt mass care response as a core and critical element of their job. Sonoma's successes can be used as a model across the Bay Area - creating training, staffing, and deployment processes that ultimately provide a sense of security and preparedness for employees in their response roles.

Doris Padilla Barone, MPA, CEM, Director,
Disaster Preparedness and Response,
San Francisco Human Services
Agency

Introduction

Over the last five years, emergency managers and human services practitioners have seen a dramatic increase in large-scale wildfires in Northern California and across the state. These increasingly complex and deadly events require a rapid and well-coordinated mass care/human services response to ensure residents evacuate, shelter, connect to resources, and recover. Through the work of the Human Services Department (HSD) and its dedicated staff, Sonoma County has been at the forefront of developing and continually refining its response strategies to meet this increased need for a response.

In the North Bay, October 2017 marked a seminal moment in the evolution of mass care fire response in Sonoma and surrounding counties. That year the Sonoma Complex Fires, including two of the most destructive to Sonoma County - the Nuns and Tubbs fires - destroyed some 7,000 structures combined. More than 100,000 residents evacuated, and over 4,000 evacuees found solace in 43 county shelters.¹ In October 2019, the Kincade Fire forced the evacuation of 200,000 residents, the largest evacuation in county history, with 3,400 residents finding refuge in 22 county shelters.² These consecutive fires, as well as additional hazards such as floods and the COVID-19 pandemic, have formalized mass care as standard, day-to-day work for the department, with lessons from each fire allowing for continuous improvement of its

¹ Sonoma County Administrator's Office of Recovery and Resiliency. (2018). *Sonoma County Recovery and Resilience Framework*. Sonoma: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors.

² Human Services Department, County of Sonoma. (2019). *Care & Shelter After-action Report October 2019 Kincade Fire*. Sonoma: Human Services Department.

response strategies. At the core of improvement work, HSD has centered on the needs of employees and disaster service workers, listening to their feedback, meeting them where they are, and providing them with the tools and skills needed to be empowered and effective mass care responders.

The following sections will briefly review the Sonoma County HSD mass care experience and recommendations that the San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) can adopt to implement structural change within mass care training, staffing, and deployment elements. Sonoma County HSD experienced that focusing on implementing structural change within the department leads to smoother cultural change. Once a strong response structure and process are developed, tested, and instituted based on employee feedback, employees work more efficiently, which lays the groundwork for internal operations, establishing a chain of command, and helping with transparency in the workplace. It is then that employees can more easily adopt mass care response as a core and critical element of their job.

Sonoma County Mass Care Lessons and Improvements

The 2017 Sonoma Complex fires and the 2019 Kincade fires stretched both HSD and the County to their limit; the number of staff, equipment, and supplies needed was beyond what was anticipated. Following both events, the Employment and Training Division (E&T) and the Planning, Research, Evaluation, and Engagement (PREE) teams organized data collection from staff through After-Action surveys and meetings, reflecting on their experiences as responders and sharing key takeaways. Two key

questions were asked through surveys and meetings with staff: (1) What worked well during the disaster? and (2) What didn't work during the disaster? While there were high-priority takeaways about technical components of mass care (shelter operations and procedures, client services, and donations and resource management), there were three significant themes that centered on employee experience and their needs:

- Coordinating work assignments and improved staff scheduling
- Managing communications, staff call-down, and notifications
- Ongoing disaster training³

The growing scale of mass care response and the people-power needed to execute the work, highlighted between 2017-2019 and documented through After-Action reports at the department and county levels, led to a more intentional and transparent process for developing staffing schedules, reporting models, and training opportunities. HSD focused on strengthening the following concepts to improve the employee preparedness and response experience.

Accessible Role-Specific Training

Employees shared that, while committed to their work as mass care responders, they required more comprehensive training around their specific roles and responsibilities, including additional education on what it means to be a disaster service worker. For example, those employees supporting shelter operations lacked fundamental shelter training and were unaware of the systems to support response (communication channels, shifts, schedules, protocols, resource requesting,

³ Planning, Research, Evaluation, and Engagement (PREE) Unit, Human Services Department. (2018). Lessons Learned from the October 2017 Wildfires: Employee and Training Staff Perspectives. Sonoma: Human Services Department, County of Sonoma.

checklists, and other job aids).⁴ Employees recommended training on a more frequent basis to prepare and maintain skills for response. Sonoma successfully designed an in-house mass care training curriculum based on this critical employee feedback. In 2020, with the arrival of COVID-19 and the need to continue to plan for wildfires and other non-pandemic disasters, HSD took their curriculum and produced a home grow series of virtual training that employees can now access remotely and at a time most convenient for them. This training is role-specific and includes specialty training areas such as working with people with access and functional needs.

Clear Schedules and Teams

Ample notification about employee shifts, assignments, and reporting instructions were identified as significant needs for employees. This staffing challenge is not unique to Sonoma, but is a global response issue common with no-notice, fast-moving events such as fires. Employees also sought clarity around the scheduling and reporting processes for alternative worksites (Temporary Evacuation Points, Shelters, and Emergency Operation Center) and deeper coordination with unit supervisors to support a pause in employee day-to-day work and allow for focused response. Knowing what role an employee will play, understanding who they will work with, and how they will be notified and supported are crucial to providing a sense of security and preparedness for their role.

Authority Around Each Seat

From the Emergency Operations Center down to Shelter sites, mass care leadership

⁴ Human Services Department, County of Sonoma. (2019). *Care & Shelter After-action Report October 2019 Kincade Fire*. Sonoma: Human Services Department.

requires trust and decision-making ability to manage the response and make the best possible decisions for the impacted populations. Sonoma highlighted that building a level of authority in leadership roles was necessary for an employee to excel within their role in the "Command and Control" structure established during disaster response. Human services practitioners are accustomed to working in a flat organizational environment that allows for a collaborative, interconnected team where everyone contributes equally. A hierarchical structure in a disaster response environment better accommodates the response size, clarifies reporting relationships, and allows leadership to direct the actions necessary for an effective response. Command and Control does not necessarily prescribe a right or wrong way to respond. Instead, it creates a way to manage a large and often chaotic response by ensuring that reporting and decision-making authority is apparent.

Recommendations for San Francisco Human Services Agency

Sonoma HSD has developed mass care employee preparedness strategies that can be easily scaled and applied to the San Francisco Human Services Agency and other Bay Area counties seeking to launch an employee-centered disaster response program.

The San Francisco Human Services Agency has shown a commitment to mass care response by establishing a Disaster Preparedness and Response (DPR) Unit that oversees the mass care components of the agency. In 2019, the DPR team was established to work with programs and departments within the agency to:

- Develop and validate disaster plans and processes, including agency,

including Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP)

- Prepare staff through training, exercise, and deployment opportunities
- Oversee the operational readiness of the agency's Department Operations Center (DOC)
- Manage mass care supply cache needed to activate shelters and other safe spaces for San Franciscans
- Lead Health and Human Services/Care and Shelter Response at the County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) level, allowing employee ownership and growth in their response roles.

The following recommendations can be integrated into the structure and work established through DPR to strengthen SFHSA's current disaster preparedness strategies, allowing community ownership and growth in their response roles.

Create accessible online training and educational modules for pre-established response teams, onboarding DSWs, and agency leadership. Traditional disaster response training is generally conducted in person to enable role-playing and rapid problem-solving in a face-to-face environment. SFHSA has historically relied on the American Red Cross, the Department of Emergency Management, or other regional entities to offer and provide mass care and shelter training. While these opportunities for training are well received, they are space-limited, in-person only, and offered on a bi-annual or quarterly basis.

To modernize training opportunities and tailor the curriculum to reflect the unique nature of San Francisco's disaster response environment and policies, SFHSA should

explore developing simple mass care training videos accessible through the City's learning management system or the agency's intranet portal. With employees continuing to work remotely and new employees onboarding onto the organization daily, Sonoma has demonstrated that online virtual training can significantly benefit employees because of its accessibility and just-in-time nature.

Develop response teams by unit and pre-determined staffing schedules to ensure rapid deployment of staff and a consistent staffing cadence. Sonoma has successfully pre-established teams with consistent roles, sites, and shifts to create a faster employee-call-down process and provide employees with security and preparedness in their roles. SFHSA has begun this type of work by establishing teams for DOC and EOC activations but has not formally established teams to lead and support other mass care functions such as shelters, local assistance centers, and points of distribution. The strategy used by Sonoma County has been to assign whole units, with their existing supervisors/managers, to specific functions such as shelter setup, shelter support team, technical support (IT), EOC Care and Shelter Branch, and others.⁵ They have also specified how many shifts, what times, and on what days of the week each unit is expected to cover weekly. This level of granular planning for staffing and schedules would create a more streamlined staff activation process.

Increase opportunities for response experience through Bay Area mutual aid. Sonoma has refined its response processes and prepared its employees through regular evacuations, temporary evacuation point

activations, and shelter operations. With wildfire season now spanning the entire year, they activate their mass care response multiple times a year, and employees can practice their roles to build muscle memory. In San Francisco, a real-world response is limited to residential fire support with the Red Cross or supporting the activation of temporary pop-up shelters for the unhoused population. Encouraging employees to engage in mutual aid opportunities to support neighboring counties during emergencies and disasters is an easy way to provide hands-on training. SFHSA should explore developing relationships with mass care teams from surrounding counties to begin informal communication around response needs and expedite specialized human services staff deployment.

Conclusion

Disaster response is now a growing reality in the human services environment. The escalating climate crisis resulting in wildfires and other natural hazards has made it so that mass care response has become the most critical of functions, providing residents with a rapid, efficient, and safe response experience. This overview has highlighted the small but impactful improvements that can be made within human services agencies to improve how we respond, but more importantly, it has illustrated that an agency's mass care response is only as good as its employees are prepared. The intersection of mass care response and an employee-centered preparedness approach is how we work to ensure our workforce feels safe, secure, and prepared to carry out their response role.

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⁵ Sonoma County Shelter Council. (2021). Sonoma County Evacuation Field Guide. Sonoma: Human Services Department, Sonoma

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