

Office Of Emergency Services

Report of the 1999-2000 San Francisco Civil Grand Jury

BACKGROUND

Considering the devastation of the 1906 earthquake and Loma Prieta in 1989, as well as the perennial predictions that another major earthquake is likely to occur in the San Francisco Bay Area, the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury decided to attempt to determine how well prepared the City is to cope with an earthquake comparable to those of 1906 and 1989 — a terrorist attack, a tsunami, a hazardous material spill or other life-threatening disaster.

METHODOLOGY

Members of the Civil Grand Jury (CGJ) visited the Mayor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) at 1011 Turk St. and took an extensive tour of the new facility. The CGJ members were favorably impressed by the overall program and the systems that are in place to deal with major disasters. The CGJ discussed with the director of OES the changes that have taken place in the past ten years in demographics, communications, seismic upgrading of residential and commercial buildings, loss of military personnel and facilities, limited availability of hospital beds and emergency care facilities, and other factors that affect San Francisco's ability to provide emergency services in the event of a major disaster.

CONCLUSIONS

Members of the CGJ were encouraged by the following: the state-of-the-art technology (especially in emergency operations and communications linking the OES to many city departments) of the Command Center on Turk St., the perceived competence of the center's director and staff, the Fire Department's Neighborhood Emergency Response Team (NERT) training program, the network of Volunteer Ham Radio and REACT communicators to provide back-up and supplementary radio channels in an emergency, the progress in retrofitting public school buildings, some of the freeway structures and City Hall, the plan to have City Hall become the center of government responses to a disaster, and attempts to inform the general population on the emergency services that are available when disaster strikes.

The CGJ members were troubled, however, by the following: a substantial drop in the number of hospital beds available, the closing of emergency rooms at French, Mount Zion and Children's hospitals, the closing and planned demolition of Letterman Army Hospital, the deactivation of many Bay Area military bases that were able and well equipped to respond to disasters in the area, the slow progress in seismic upgrading of residential and commercial buildings in San Francisco, the increase in population in areas threatened by earthquakes, especially in parts of the City that have constructed buildings on landfills. Members of the CGJ are concerned about the delays and other logistical problems in getting firefighters and police officers into the City in an emergency since 64 percent of the firefighters and 60 percent of the police personnel live outside San Francisco.

The CGJ found that the director of OES and the five staff positions are filled through mayoral appointment and that there is no procedural or legal impediment to a newly elected mayor filling all six positions with people who are more adept at political organizing than coordinating emergency services. In view of the history of major earthquakes in San Francisco and the Bay Area and the probability that comparable earthquakes will occur, the OES needs expertise, continuity and experience to ensure that competent professionals are in the position of coordinating emergency services in the event of a major disaster.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Civil Grand Jury recommends the following:

1. Convert the director's position of the OES and the five staff from appointive to competitive civil service positions to ensure continuity in the coordination of emergency services. One solution could be to move the OES from the Mayor's Office to another City department with a civil service infrastructure, such as the Department of Administrative Services.

Required Response

Mayor

Human Resources Department

2. Devise a logistical plan to ensure that sufficient fire and police personnel living outside San Francisco can be transported to the City in an emergency.

Required Response

Director of the Office of Emergency Services

Fire Department

Police Department

3. Increase the availability of information — via mass media, websites, community organizations, and public schools — on emergency services, NERT training programs, the food and material components of emergency survival kits, and avenues of communication during major emergencies.

Required Response

Director of the Office of Emergency Services

4. The Department of Public Health and other pertinent City officials need to review the loss in recent years of hospital beds and emergency room care and take appropriate measures to ensure that there are sufficient hospital beds and emergency treatment facilities to meet ongoing needs and emergency situations.

Required Response

Mayor

Board of Supervisors

Director of the Office of Emergency Services
Department of Public Health