

A Review of the Evacuation Plan for the Hall of Justice

Background

As the 1998-1999 Ventura County Grand Jury assembled for the first time it was clear, due to the potential for natural and man-made disasters, that a plan for an emergency evacuation needed to be established. A member of the Ventura County Grand Jury took the responsibility of designating an exit route, an assembly area, and an accounting process. This was done quickly by gathering information from all members, following common sense and using good judgment. It was not known at this time if an official evacuation policy existed or, if it did, what the Grand Jury's evacuation procedure was.

In September the General Services Agency circulated a memo announcing an Evacuation Drill would be held some time within the next 60-90 days. This prompted a member of the Ventura County Grand Jury, as a concerned party and a Grand Juror, to learn what the existing evacuation policy of the Hall of Justice was and how well it worked when implemented.

Findings

General Service Agency

A member of the Ventura County Grand Jury contacted the General Services Agency Representative in charge of Security and found that the Evacuation Plans for every Ventura County Government building were "works-in-progress." Plans have been in the preparation stage for two years and were approaching a final draft. This draft plan specifies the duties of an Evacuation Manager, Assembly Area Coordinators, and others who will be directly involved in the building evacuation.

Challenges unique to public buildings have to be overcome. Many Federal and State requirements need to be met. Accounting for employees, who work in the field, as well as the county buildings, has to be done. In addition to employees, the public, as well as prisoners, need to be evacuated.

Building Committee Meeting

A member of the Ventura County Grand Jury attended a Hall of Justice Building Committee meeting on October 27, 1998 at which the Evacuation Plan was discussed. Assembly Areas were assigned for each department. These departments included the Sheriff's Department, the Public Defender's Office, The District Attorney's Office, the Courts, the Law Library, and the Grand Jury. It was decided by the committee to make the Grand Jury its own department due to the Grand Jury's unique accounting procedures.

Another issue discussed in the Hall of Justice Building Committee meeting, regarding the evacuation plan, was the labeling of light poles in the parking lots. It was recommended that they be labeled in an understandable manner. The public, as well as employees, has a difficult time finding their cars, let alone Assembly Areas, due to poor labeling. Also, it was pointed out that one exit area was partially blocked with janitorial supplies and discarded office equipment.

911

A member of the Ventura County Grand Jury contacted the Sheriff's Communication Manager for information pertaining to emergency numbers to be used in the Ventura County buildings located at 800 South Victoria Avenue. If the 911 emergency number were to be reached by a phone at this location a caller would have to dial 9-9-911. This may be confusing in an emergency. The General Services Representative in charge of Security would like people to call her directly but her number is not easily memorized and people may have to look it up. This could pose some problem in an emergency. This is a procedural matter, which needs attention.

Evacuation Drill

An Evacuation Drill of the Hall of Justice was held on November 13, 1998 at 3:45 p.m. The public, the employees, and prisoners were evacuated in good order. The Departments evacuated the building without incident within ten minutes. Accounting of employee whereabouts was done in part. The Departments were able to account for most employees but were unable to report this to the Command Center. A Command Center was not established due to an unexpected incident in another area. The all clear was given and people reentered the building at approximately 4:10 p.m.

Interviews

Members of the Grand Jury interviewed several Evacuation Managers. Comments were solicited concerning what went well in the evacuation drill and what could be improved. As a whole the Evacuation managers were pleased with the outcome of the drill; however, some im-

provements were suggested. One Evacuation Manager recommended radios be given to every Evacuation Manager so they may monitor a situation and report vital information.

The Main Jail and Other Government Center Buildings

The Main Jail, which is under the Sheriff's Department, has an evacuation policy in place. The Inmates first evacuation Assembly Area is in the basement of the Hall of Justice. This is reasonable because it is enclosed. If this area is unavailable the inmates will be cuffed and grouped in the parking area. This may pose a potential problem if inmates are located in the same Assembly Areas as court personnel.

If all the buildings in the Ventura County Government Center were evacuated at the same time there may be a great deal of congestion in the parking areas. People may be crowded and confused. This scenario has never been practiced.

Conclusions

The Evacuation Plan for the Hall of Justice is a commendable achievement. The public, employees, and prisoners are evacuated quickly, calmly and in an orderly manner. Federal and State requirements are being met.

There are problem areas, however. Difficulty in establishing and reporting to the Command Center and discarded items partially blocking an exit were noted. Alternate Assembly Areas, in the event an area is not accessible, have not been established. The labels on the poles in the parking lot have not been changed and make little (if any) sense. Emergency phone numbers to be used at the 800 South Victoria Avenue address need to be made clear to everyone.

Recommendations

1. Radios be permanently given to each Evacuation Manager in each Department which could be used to monitor a situation and report vital information. These radios should be kept on a charger in a central location next to a posted evacuation plan.
2. At least one Alternate Assembly Area be established in the event one or more Assembly Areas are inaccessible.
3. The Assembly Areas be labeled on light poles in the parking areas.
4. The parking areas be labeled in a clear and concise manner.
5. All exit areas be free of obstruction.
6. Stickers with emergency phone numbers be placed on every

county phone. The county phones could have a designated number such as 1234, which would go through to the proper authority.

7. A comprehensive evacuation drill of all buildings in the Ventura County Government Center including the Main Jail be done simultaneously. Volunteers could be used to simulate prisoners.
8. A phone number be specified, in an evacuation policy, for employees to call in their whereabouts if they are not in the office during a disaster.

Responses Required

1. General Services Agency: Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8
2. Ventura County Sheriff's Department: Recommendations 6 and 7