

Ventura County Emergency Operations Center

Summary

The Ventura County Sheriff is the Director of Disaster Services and manages the Office of Emergency Services (OES). One of the responsibilities of the OES is to maintain the County's Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The Ventura County OES staff was found to perform all necessary functions according to established procedure, and the EOC facility, while needing some superficial upgrades, was found to be adequate to address foreseeable local emergencies.

Background

This inquiry was prompted by a Grand Jury protocol visit to the Ventura County EOC. On this initial visit, members of the Grand Jury found the facility unimpressive, and it did not inspire a feeling of safety and security. An inquiry was initiated to determine the requirements for the EOC and to determine if the Ventura County facility met those requirements.

Methodology

The Grand Jury visited the EOC and talked to the personnel who manage the EOC. The Grand Jury obtained and reviewed the "County of Ventura Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) Multi-Hazard Functional Plan (MHFP)," published in 2002. The state of California web site was reviewed for state legislation and policy. For comparison purposes, the jury visited the Los Angeles County and San Luis Obispo County EOCs.

During the course of this investigation, the 2003 Southern California fires tested the emergency operations as well as the California SEMS procedures. This emergency was an opportunity to determine if the Ventura County EOC would be adequate for an actual emergency and to determine if there were limitations on the response.

Subsequent to the Grand Jury visit, the main EOC facility was temporarily closed down for repairs, and the jury had the opportunity to visit the backup facility at the East County Sheriff's Station.

Findings

County EOC Facilities

- F-01.** The Ventura County EOC is physically located in the basement of the Sheriff's Department facility at the Ventura County Government Center. A backup location is at 2101 East Olsen Road, at the East County Police Services office in Thousand Oaks, and can be used when the main facility is unavailable or undesirable. A second alternate EOC is located at the Camarillo Police Department at 3701 East Las Posas Road.

- F-02. All locations of the Ventura County EOC are operated and maintained by the Ventura County OES, located at 800 South Victoria Avenue, Ventura.
- F-03. The Ventura County EOC is the facility wherein the OES can provide services to various agencies involved in emergency response. Regardless of the type of incident, the EOC agency participants' main purpose is accumulating and sharing information to ensure coordinated and timely emergency response. Communication is vital to the EOC mission, specifically the availability of telephone (land line and cellular), radio communications, public television and radio, as well as police and fire dispatch services. Coordination with supporting agencies and media services is an essential function.
- F-04. EOC communications infrastructure has been, and will continue to be, a subject of emphasis and expenditure.

EOC Staffing and Procedures

- F-05. The OES is guided by the California Mutual Aid Plan. There are three administrative regions represented: Southern Region (11 counties), Coastal Region (16 counties), and Inland Region (31 counties). Ventura County belongs to the Southern Administrative Region (see map Attachment I).
- F-06. Fire response and law enforcement operations each maintain their own mutual aid agreements. The remaining organizations are coordinated through the OES.
- F-07. Mutual aid assistance is requested when disaster relief requirements exceed the combined capabilities of the cities and the county's ability to meet them. OES personnel will ensure that a reasonable degree of county resources has been committed before requesting mutual aid assistance.
- F-08. The sheriff serves as the Director of Emergency Services and directs the County of Ventura's Emergency Management Organization. Within California's emergency management organizational structure, each county serves as an operational area. In this role, the sheriff's OES acts as an agent between the state OES and the cities, special districts and unincorporated areas of Ventura County.
- F-09. The Ventura County EOC is staffed by Sheriff's Department Support Services Division personnel. The responding agency representatives who will use the EOC during any given incident are determined by the nature of the emergency.
- F-10. SEMS is required by California Government Code section 8607 for managing response to multi-agency and multi-jurisdiction emergencies in California. SEMS consists of five organizational levels that are activated as necessary: field response, local government, operational area, regional and state. Local governments must use SEMS to be eligible for funding of their personnel-related costs under state disaster assistance programs. The primary components of SEMS are the training of personnel, communications among organizations, and the compatibility of infrastructure in the various jurisdictions.

- F-11. SEMS requires five functions: management, operations, planning/intelligence, logistics, and finance/administration. These five functions must be incorporated consistently from the field level through the state level. These five functions are established as organizational sections within the EOC.
- F-12. The County of Ventura and the EOC use the Incident Command System (ICS) and SEMS in emergency response operations. The sheriff requires that all personnel use the ICS while on normal duty to ensure familiarity when an emergency arises.
- F-13. EOC training is conducted when the EOC is inactive.
- F-14. The county maintains a list of the most likely emergency situations based on geographic location, past history, and current world events.
- F-15. The plans and budgets for the EOC are evaluated against the probabilities of expected emergencies, and the EOC is staffed and outfitted to facilitate responses to those emergencies.

Ventura County Threats and EOC Activation

- F-16. The MHFP defines the threats that could impact Ventura County based on hazard analysis. The threats include major earthquake, hazardous material incident, flooding, dam failure, major air crash, train derailment, trucking incident, civil unrest, terrorism, national security (nuclear) emergency, landslide, tsunami, marine oil spill, and wildland fire.
- F-17. The MHFP is initiated:
 - When the governor has proclaimed a State of Emergency in an area that includes the County of Ventura or cities within its boundaries or the President has declared a National Emergency
 - In the event of an attack warning, the observation of a nuclear detonation, or the proclamation of a State of War Emergency as defined in the California Emergency Services Act
- F-18. The Ventura County EOC is activated on the order of the sheriff or his designee, authorized by County of Ventura's Ordinance 2538. Several factors can be considered in the activation decision:
 - If two or more cities are involved in or affected by the emergency situation
 - If resources from outside the county are required to address the emergency
 - If the MHFP is initiated
- F-19. When the EOC is activated, the Sheriff of Ventura County functions as the Operational Area Coordinator and has the overall responsibility for coordinating and supporting emergency operations within the county.
- F-20. In the year 2003, the EOC was activated once, due to the Ventura County fires. At approximately 4:00 p.m. on Saturday, October 25, 2003, at the request of the Ventura County Fire Chief, the sheriff initiated a Local Emergency Proclamation and activated the county EOC. The fire chief communicated that the fire had progressed beyond the capability of local

- emergency resources. The primary purpose for the EOC activation was to request assistance and coordinate firefighting resources from across the state.
- F-21. The EOC was fully activated and operational within an hour of the sheriff's order.
- F-22. Once the EOC is activated, the Incident Action Plan outlines the actions and points of contacts for the specific emergency.
- F-23. During activation, the EOC is manned 24 hours a day. Duty shifts are 12 hours on and 12 hours off, with shifts changing at 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.
- F-24. The EOC does not guide what happens during an emergency. The appropriate operational agency guides the action, and the EOC provides requested support to those efforts.
- F-25. During a disaster, the OES personnel gather information on the county's emergency response needs, and assess county and state resources. OES personnel facilitate the acquisition, use, and coordination of those resources.
- F-26. Any city or city and county declaring a local emergency for which the governor proclaims a state of emergency, and any state agency responding to that emergency, shall complete and transmit an after-action report to OES within 90 days of the close of the incident period.

EOC Lessons Learned

- F-27. After the fires, a California Blue Ribbon Commission was formed to coordinate after-action efforts with emergency personnel throughout the state. The County of Ventura is represented on this commission by a member of the Board of Supervisors and by the fire chief.
- F-28. In the event of fire emergencies, the County of Ventura's policy is to maintain "defensible space" around residences and businesses. This policy recommends that residents stay in their homes as long as the fire department and emergency personnel can maintain a safe perimeter. Due to aggressive weed abatement programs and natural barriers in the county terrain, residents remaining in their homes can contribute to protection efforts by hosing down the grounds and buildings as long as there is no significant risk.
- F-29. According to fire and law enforcement personnel, the State of California has no enforceable statutory authority for a mandatory evacuation under any circumstances. Residents cannot be forced to leave their homes, even when officials believe their lives are in imminent danger. All evacuation orders are voluntary, even when considered absolutely necessary by officials.
- F-30. The term "voluntary evacuation" gives some citizens the impression that there is no urgency or that the evacuation is not absolutely required. From an emergency services perspective, all recommendations to evacuate are voluntary, but a recommendation to evacuate is made only when absolutely necessary to save lives. When residents refuse or delay the evacuation, the only recourse that emergency response personnel have is to document the "next of kin" for notification purposes.

- F-31. There is currently a recommendation from the California Blue Ribbon Commission that a standard terminology be developed for evacuation that will appropriately communicate the urgency of the request.
- F-32. There are evacuation policy issues relating to county boundaries. For instance, the Ventura County policy to have residents remain in their homes as long as practical is in contrast to neighboring county policies to have residents evacuate immediately. Unfortunately, during the 2003 fires, Ventura County residents adjacent to the county boundaries received direction to evacuate from neighboring county emergency personnel in error. Their evacuations crowded emergency access roads and impeded efforts of our county's response personnel.
- F-33. Various agencies responding to the mutual aid requests for assistance had problems with incompatible communications equipment. While all responders had the equipment required by mutual aid operating in the appropriate response frequencies, the number of simultaneous incidents quickly used up the available communications channels. Additional channels were available on some equipment, but not all responders had access to those additional channels.
- F-34. A public hotline in the EOC was used for the first time in this fire emergency. This hotline had been installed earlier, but this was the first general emergency that provided a test for the system. The hotline relieved the dispatch lines of many informational calls, freeing up those lines for emergency response.

Fire Specific Lessons Learned

- F-35. The nature of the 2003 Southern California fires stretched resources thinner than any remembered event. These fires were a reminder that all circumstances cannot be foreseen, and no government agency can be 100 percent prepared for unforeseen circumstances. The fires far exceeded the state's allocated resources and overtaxed the abilities of emergency response organizations.
- F-36. Agency representation to the local command posts as well as city and county emergency centers was stretched to the point where the County EOC did not have fire department representation for a time.
- F-37. The Ventura County Fire Department published an after-action report from the 2003 fires titled, "Ventura County Wildland Fire Siege October 2003." This report reviewed the successes and failures of the emergency response efforts and provided recommendations to correct deficiencies.
- F-38. The report provided recommendations in the areas of inter-agency communications, public awareness and responsibilities, fuel management, and training and staffing issues.

Secondary Concerns

- F-39. The Red Cross advises displaced residents to check in or register with the Red Cross emergency centers even if the residents have other places to stay. The Red Cross centers provide centralized coordination to obtain status on

relatives and friends. Centralized registering also enables the Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to follow up with their services after the emergency.

- F-40. After-action committees recommended that shelters receive briefings from emergency personnel so displaced residents would know the status of the emergency. This was especially relevant to the 2003 fire emergency when media resources were stretched thin to the point where local fire status did not make the news. The television stations did not cover our fires.
- F-41. It was mentioned that there was no centralized television information available to residents in the fire areas. The local cable channels were not receiving a direct feed, with sporadic “crawls” (text messages across the bottom of television screens) being the only information available. The networks had little or no timely updates on the fires.
- F-42. During the fires, air quality within the EOC facility was a general concern. The building’s ventilation system did not filter out the smoke and ash from the fires.
- F-43. The current location in the basement of the sheriff’s jail is subject to leakage from a sewage line in the building above. Precautions are taken to protect equipment from water damage.
- F-44. During the course of the inquiry, the EOC was closed temporarily for repairs to the heating and ventilation system. During the repairs, the facility at the East County Police Services was used.
- F-45. As with all functions at the Ventura County Government Center, parking is a particular concern for EOC operations.
- F-46. Within the EOC facility, there are three television screens used for viewing local television coverage during emergency situations. The televisions are identical, with identical remote controls, with the result that all channels are forced to change simultaneously. All televisions are on the same channel, restricting information available on other channels.
- F-47. The EOC does not have a general operating budget. There are some funds allocated through grants. The approving body for Homeland Defense funds has discretion for allocating funds for the operation of the EOC. Currently, \$40,000 in grants has been allocated among all Ventura County EOCs to be used for video conferencing, satellite telephones, and mapping communications technologies. The EOS is actively seeking other grants for funding.
- F-48. The California Blue Ribbon Commission has identified and recommended solutions to most of the problems encountered in the 2003 fires. Ventura County plans to implement the recommendations of this commission.

Conclusions

- C-01. The location and aesthetics of the Ventura County EOC are not necessary or critical to the operation of the unit. While the facilities are not opulent, the county does not seem to experience degraded emergency response due to any

- deficiencies of the EOC support facilities or services. (F-01, F-02, F-03, F-04, F-43, F-44, F-45, F-46)
- C-02. Response to emergencies within the county is not dependent on the activation of the County EOC. Emergency response is handled by the appropriate law enforcement, fire, or services organizations within the cities and county. (F-03, F-07, F-08, F-09, F-10, F-12, F-17, F-19, F-25)
- C-03. Activation of the EOC is required primarily for the coordination of multiple jurisdictions and for the request of additional services from the state and other counties. (F-03, F-04, F-05, F-06, F-07, F-08, F-09, F-10, F-17, F-19, F-22)
- C-04. Flexibility in location and services is an advantage in the operation of the EOC. The facility location, central to the required personnel, is ideal for rapid coordination and response. (F-01, F-03, F-08, F-09, F-21)
- C-05. The coordinated capability to respond to area emergencies is more a result of the experience, training, procedures and dedication of personnel than the facilities. (F-13, F-19, F-22, F-23, F-24)
- C-06. The staffing of the Ventura County EOC is appropriate to the makeup of the county and the convenient access to additional resources as required. (F-24, F-34)
- C-07. Los Angeles and San Luis Obispo counties had larger and aesthetically more impressive facilities for their EOC functions. These facilities may or may not have been necessary due to the size or nature of emergencies in those counties. The Ventura County facility appears to be appropriately sized and funded for the nature of our county and our expected emergencies. (F-14, F-15)
- C-08. Large-scale emergencies could be managed more effectively if mutual aid emergency personnel had access to compatible, interoperable communications equipment. (F-33)
- C-09. Response to multi-city, large-scale emergencies would be more effective if coordination were moved from individual cities to a central or primary coordination point at the Ventura County EOC. (F-35, F-36)
- C-10. There was a perception that the decision to open the EOC or declare an emergency during the fires might have been delayed based on a lack of coordination and communication. It was unclear whether the decision to open the EOC should have been an independent decision of the sheriff or whether the sheriff should wait for an expert recommendation from the fire chief, based on the nature of this emergency and the availability of local resources. (F-17, F-20)
- C-11. During an emergency, it would be more efficient and less disruptive if the television channels could be changed independently by remote control versus manually changing the channels. (F-46)

Recommendations

- R-01.** In emergencies requiring coordinated efforts from agencies outside the Sheriff's Department, there should be a more defined procedure for notifying the sheriff that activation of the EOC and OES is required. The procedure should include timely notification of resource capacity before it reaches a critical level requiring outside support.
- R-02.** Ventura County should establish the protocols and procedures to coordinate multi-city, large-scale emergencies from the Ventura County EOC. In addition, funds should be allocated for communications equipment upgrades to accommodate coordinated responses.
- R-03.** EOC should be allowed to purchase or upgrade the existing televisions or remote control units.
- R-04.** When new space becomes available to the county, the EOC should be allowed to upgrade or move to new facilities.

Responses Required

Ventura County Sheriff (R-01, R-02, R-03, R-04)

Ventura County Board of Supervisors (R-01, R-02, R-03, R-04)

Responses Requested

Fire Chief, Ventura County Fire Protection District (R-01, R-02)

Commendations

The Ventura County EOC demonstrates the principle that excellence does not require excess. The proper prioritization and coordination of resources in fulfilling the requirement for an emergency response capability appears to have resulted in a lean, effective organization, appropriate to its mission.

Attachment I. Map of California OES Administrative Regions – Southern Region

