

Discussion

Recommendation 1: Staff the Office of Emergency Services (OES) with a senior director (and experienced professional staff) with cross-departmental authority and direct report responsibility to City executive management.

Identified Gaps

The existing Office of Emergency Services structure and staffing complement does not adequately address the City's multiple needs for internal readiness and external coordination work. The OES is currently situated in the Fire Department and staffed by an interim coordinator (full-time) and a staff analyst (part-time); an assistant fire chief is the OES unit supervisor.

"We need someone at the top of this command who has vision, staff and the appropriate funding."

Annette Glankopf, Co-chair
Palo Alto Neighbors (PAN)

Given this position in the organization, OES does not have the authority to overcome planning and preparedness deficiencies. After conducting interviews with city staff stakeholders, it is clear that departments are working in their subject-matter areas of expertise and not coordinating effectively on emergency/disaster readiness. Departments do not fully consider beforehand their responsibility in crisis situations that cut across boundaries, sectors and jurisdictions. No single group has demonstrated crisis management or leadership on a comprehensive level, resulting in a fragmented and ineffective approach to response and readiness. This is reflected in recent staff findings from the 2010 plane crash incident, and in the project interviews.

In the September 2010 City Council update on emergency preparedness, staff cited the need to update and/or complete the City Emergency Operations Plan (i.e., finalize missing annexes); Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP); Public Health Emergency Plan (includes Pandemic event planning); the Community Emergency Plan; and, the Foothills Fire/Emergency Plan. City staff assessments of recent disruptive events cite the need for a unified emergency management system with ways to track internal accountability for implementing lessons gained through direct experience; incorporating best practices gleaned from the research and technical practice literature; and, mainstreaming OES operations into the organization's and community's life.

Proposed Office Structure and Staffing

The City is advised to appoint a Director of Emergency Services assigned at a senior staff level, with a position description that defines specific responsibility for the City's overall emergency/disaster readiness. The overall responsibilities would be to identify and compile information on local hazards; conduct a systematic community risk assessment; develop a comprehensive management approach to include prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery initiatives. Such an appointment would tangibly demonstrate the City's commitment to overall community readiness. This position would be a direct report to the City's executive management with organization-wide authority. The work to be done warrants the City Council's and City Manager's *imprimatur*; quarterly performance reports can help keep the Council priority a front burner issue.

61%

61% of interviewees believe the Palo Alto OES requires more centralized leadership and vision.

In addition, designate two professional staff positions and one administrative staff position to form an interdisciplinary OES to improve City and community readiness. Of the professional staff, one position would be designated as the City's internal planning and preparedness coordinator; and, the second would serve as a community liaison for public safety, other community network coordination, and funds development. Administrative staff is crucial to support the OES team and manage the planning, training and scheduling logistics for city and community training initiatives. This recommendation could be implemented by re-casting current positions to the elevated, organization-wide platform needed to ensure the City's commitment to emergency/disaster readiness.

Integrate Internal Efforts

Emergency/disaster readiness ought to be a core competency for all senior staff, including department directors and deputy directors.¹ Taking modest first steps can develop the staff capacity: developing departmental emergency/disaster procedures; including readiness metrics in performance evaluations; institutionalizing Disaster Service Worker readiness beyond "paper compliance" with thorough training on departmental activities to complement emergency and disaster response.

Updating and/or completing all emergency procedures and plans are essential steps for the City. The need for this was mentioned in many staff interviews, and cited in the September 2010 City Council update. Updating the City's 2007 Emergency Operations Plan as well as departmental operating procedures; the continuity of operations plan; Public Health emergency planning; and, anti-terrorism and security procedures will raise awareness and establish improved coordination.

Consistent emergency/disaster training and locally-generated disaster exercises will improve the general readiness quotient for all staff across department lines. Operational departments—Public Works, Utilities, Police and Fire Departments—are dependable in their response to in-the-moment emergencies. Their staff colleagues are not as well engaged. At present, staff in non-operational departments would benefit from more in-depth briefing on their disaster roles and duties. Regular training at the division and department levels can remedy this shortcoming and build functioning, multi-disciplinary teams.

Harnessing the professional expertise and authority of the staff emergency preparedness working group and the more senior steering committee is critical. These internal staff groups are not sufficiently organized or staffed to make meaningful progress in planning, training and exercise efforts. Though there are diffused readiness efforts, scattered among city departments, the organization uses these groups mostly for information sharing when they could be meaningfully used as decision-making and action-based groups. Authority and responsibility for disaster readiness is indeterminate; staff is caught in a confusing leadership gap, as cited by City staff interviewees and the TriData/ICMA February fire services study.

Continue the departmental planning and training that includes National Incident Management System (NIMS), state and regional disaster exercises, and Palo Alto-specific planning both within the city government and in the community with the private sector and City residents. Supplement generic disaster exercises with city-specifics for more in-depth capacity building. Palo Alto has program and operational components that, pulled together from varied departments, could form a cogent, more socially enticing and professional approach to community safety.

Improve Community Coordination

As cited in Palo Alto stakeholder interviews for this project and in City staff reports, disaster readiness efforts are diffused in the community. There are many groups with ambitious programs going on at the block, neighborhood and larger area levels. These need to be more closely knit together, respecting the niche role each program and effort plays in the larger work and honoring the traditions that community volunteers have established and assiduously maintain.

Community support and good will could be strengthened by the City's decisions on how to structure the Office of Emergency Services and readiness initiatives. In its September 2010 report to the City Council on readiness issues, staff examines the situation with community groups working on emergency preparedness and the need to integrate the varied community efforts; improve ways for volunteers to connect; and to work on leader succession plans. These are all necessary tasks on which to embark and could begin immediately.

Staff is perceived, for the most part, to shy away from community involvement. There are exceptions to this, but in general, it is time to change the organizational culture and enliven the interactions between the community and City staff. Such a change would be a significant improvement, as would having staff interact with the community as equal partners, and not as clients or potential disaster victims. This would be a step towards improved civility and respect.

Easing territorial issues in the community through diplomatic engagement is essential, as is melding community programs into a cohesive whole to lessen the confused boundaries among groups. The basis of a strong, resilient community is in its relationships, the "social capital" that is created through block and faith-based groups and other shared interest affiliations.² This is an important aspect of Palo Alto's potential for improved emergency/disaster readiness. Research shows that when neighbors know each other and have strong relationships, City Hall can more effectively partner to increase social network building and programs tailored to specific community needs like improved volunteer access in a crisis or specified procedures for making post-disaster donations.

42%

42% of interviewees believe there is significant disconnect between the Palo Alto OES and the greater community.

“PA CERT wants to work with cooperative independence.”

Doug Kalish, Community Coordinator, PA CERT

64%

64% of interviewees believe the Palo Alto OES needs to increase its collaborative efforts with other government agencies, community groups, and non-government organizations involved in EMS.

Another challenge is for the varied neighborhood groups to work more closely together to support their common goal of a well-prepared city. The newly renamed Palo Alto Community Emergency Response Training (PA CERT), Palo Alto Neighborhoods (PAN) and other community groups would benefit greatly if they were to more substantively align their efforts. As well, all community groups would improve their efficacy if they were to promote more diversity in their membership. Inviting more young people, whether they are students or young families, to participate in these important community activities would be a welcome addition to the existing groups. It will spread the work to more people and build the successor base to the current leadership. Emergent leadership in the community needs more than sporadic interest from its government; the City needs to provide ongoing support for growing and maintaining engaged community networks and activities.

Palo Alto's community is a strong partner in disaster preparedness—people are engaged and clamoring to work with City leaders. This opportunity can be used to good purpose; it too rare a situation to squander by eroding the goodwill and trust of community leaders with indecision and inaction.

The business, commercial and research sectors need to be invited into the larger community on a broader scale than currently is in place. Palo Alto's major employers depend on the City's ability to manage risk and protect private sector assets as well. Having a staff coordinator to strengthen and coordinate activities with the community and partner institutions/agencies will improve readiness and solidify relations between City Hall and professional groups. A recent study published by the National Research Council shows that communities with strong, pre-disaster bonds among sectors recover more readily after crises.³

The City's outgoing public information is helpful on the City of Palo Alto website, through AlertSCC and other push technologies. Having a community coordinator in the OES program will supplement the capacity to distribute information and boost education and outreach goals. Having a full-time staff assignment will allow for more engaged contact, beyond what is possible now.

It is in the best interests of all to cultivate a more robust partnership with Stanford University. Working more closely with the Stanford University campus would be an entry point to invite students as interns in community outreach and organizing efforts to diversify and strengthen readiness efforts. Good relations between the City and campus are in place at the staff level, and bringing in the senior leadership as active colleagues in disaster readiness planning is another crucial aspect to be improved.