

Customizing our Systematic Approach to Communicate to County Residents During Individual Unplanned Significant Events

San Bernardino County California

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1. Abstract of the Program

The Department of Public Health, Division of Environmental Health Services (DEHS) has always recognized the need for a systematic approach in communication. However, due to the uniqueness and size of our County a thought out approach is not always reasonable or the best method. In order to effectively and efficiently communicate with County residents and to properly react to an unplanned significant event, we have found the best method is to be flexible in our approach. Rather than utilizing a predetermined plan, DEHS focuses our time and training on how to quickly create a unique communication plan for each specific unplanned event. Our Division realized that during these types of events such as the most recent catastrophic wildfire and the Influenza A H1N1 pandemic, we must be innovative and adaptable in our communication and our methods to rapidly disseminate pertinent information to the public. Through collaboration with Cal Trans, use of our internal resources, and coordination with other government agencies, we were able to disseminate critical information to the residents in a remarkably short time, thus achieving our goal to protect public health and safety.

2. The Problem/Need for the Program

The Division of Environmental Health Services (DEHS) serves the largest geographical County within the Continental United States. Within our County a significant portion of the San Andreas Fault exists. The fault meets the San Bernardino Mountains which runs at the base and crosses through the Cajon Pass into Wrightwood. Due to its immense length, our mountains are more likely subject to wildfires and earthquakes. This anomaly creates occasions where DEHS must plan to immediately develop a new course of action for that particular event.

Residents of San Bernardino County reside in remote desert regions, rural farming areas, mountain communities and densely populated urban areas, making it highly subject to wildfires, earthquakes, drought and floods. Vast and varied terrain makes information dissemination in an effective, efficient and timely manner a challenge. New communication techniques using our systematic approach in a unique fashion must be derived to meet the needs of the situation. Although the original principals remain consistent, unique methods to communicate with County residents during unplanned significant events must be urgently developed.

Delivering information over a widespread area can be a daunting task. In years previous, DEHS typically relied on the United States Postal Service to distribute general information to the public. This form of delivery was ineffective in disseminating the information in a timely manner, especially to those living in distant or remote areas.

The situation is made worse during emergencies or significant events such as a pandemic, earthquake, or fire. During these events, the increased challenge of power outages, road closures and tapped resources add to the dilemma. Finding a solution to deliver time-sensitive information to our residents became a high priority.

3. Description of the Program

DEHS developed a new system which provided opportunities for DEHS staff to effectively and innovatively meet the needs of the community. This allowed us to quickly lower and eliminate the risk to public health and safety. DEHS implemented a systematic approach to first gauge the situation, then evaluate our resources, determine our challenges and obstacles, and lastly to react accordingly. Although the fundamental principals remain the same, our methods to respond are tailored specifically to fit the incident.

Recent Wildfire Event

In a recent catastrophic event, we implemented this approach when the San Bernardino County Mountains were overcome by a massive wildfire. A total of 14,000 acres were burned, 520 structures were damaged or destroyed and approximately 35,000 people were displaced from their homes for many days. We assessed the situation and found that numerous residents had been out of electricity for several days. A significant risk existed due to the lack of electricity for an extended period of time which allowed food to spoil. When residents returned home,

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they discovered their electricity had been restored, thereby allowing food to refreeze and reach what appeared to be adequate temperatures. Many affected residents were not aware of the risks from spoiled food. We immediately evaluated our available resources and determined the best method to disseminate information pertaining to food safety and disposal. A team of highly trained DEHS staff with food safety knowledge was assembled to reach thousands of people. Educating residents on these risks was of top priority. Plans were laid out to use electronic illuminated signs, distribute “re-entry” kits, disseminate flyers at key locations, and use the “Reverse 911 system”.

We collaborated with Cal Trans to get information out to the mountain residents by utilizing their large electronic illuminated signs. These signs normally used to announce traffic and road conditions, were re-programmed to direct residents to their local Fire Stations to obtain crucial information. The illuminated signs were positioned in the entryway to main roadways leading into the mountains.

We worked with local Fire Departments and utilized their Fire Stations as a central location where residents could obtain information. DEHS Staff manned booths which were set up at Fire Stations in several mountain communities where critical food safety information was distributed to residents. Staff were onsite and available to answer questions and provide guidance on safe food handling and disposal.

In addition, food safety flyers were quickly created and assembled in order to inform people of proper disposal of spoiled foods. Targeted key locations for flyer disbursement included all known shelters, the Fire Emergency Location Assistance Center and website postings. In addition, news agencies broadcasted the critical information reaching numerous residents. The information in the food safety flyers was a critical component for residents when they returned home.

DEHS put together thousands of “re-entry kits”, which were made available by the Public Health Preparedness and Response Program. These kits were personally distributed by DEHS staff members who were responsible for manning the booths at each of the mountain community Fire Stations. The re-entry kits included more detailed information on food safety, how to boil water and food disposal locations. The kits also included items with a personal touch; gloves to handle spoiled food, masks to prevent inhalation of decaying food spores, and a heavy duty plastic disposal bag to contain liquids and solids.

We also collaborated with the Sheriff’s Department during this considerable wildfire to use the “Telephone Emergency Notification System”, also known as the “Reverse 911 System”. This system is typically used in emergency situations such as evacuations. DEHS creatively utilized this method for the first time as an added effort to contact the residents. A recorded message reached thousands of homes, relaying critical information to the mountain residents regarding safe food handling and disposal.

Influenza A H1N1 Pandemic Event

Another major recent event was the Influenza A H1N1 pandemic. DEHS was tasked with getting precautionary information out to food facilities in order to reduce the risk of the virus. We immediately set out to contact all food facilities. Through the use of mass emails and redirection of staff resources, we were able to get this crucial information across hundreds of miles of County land to every food facility within 48 hours. These flyers were posted for all to see, emphasizing the importance of frequent hand washing, and other precautions. Our efforts not only were to educate and protect food facility workers, but the public as well.

During the same time, DEHS was informed that a children’s summer camp housing hundreds of campers was experiencing an increase in the number of children with flu-like symptoms. Once again, we needed to adapt to the needs of the affected community. Knowing that this might be a possible H1N1 outbreak, DEHS staff immediately emailed and hand delivered flyers to all camps, advising them of proper personal hygiene and barriers to ward off H1N1. DEHS intervened and took a step beyond our normal course of action to help establish early detection of symptoms for H1N1. Children were pre-screened to check for elevated temperatures prior to boarding the bus for the camp. The camp in question followed the guidelines immediately and the cases diminished rapidly.

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4. Use of Technology

Several sources of technology were used to adapt to the needs of the residents during these times of unplanned significant events. The use of technology such as Envision Connect, Microsoft Office Suite, internet, and websites were utilized in our implementation.

Envision Connect is a software database program which stores information for all of our facilities. Envision Connect allowed us to send out mass emails concisely and effortlessly during the H1N1 pandemic. Thousands of email addresses for food facilities were obtained using this database.

Microsoft Office Suite was used to create various flyers for the recent wildfires.

The internet was used to post flyers, notices, and emergency bulletins on DEHS' website. When an unplanned event occurs, the website has proven to be one of the quickest modes of communication.

5. The Cost of the Program

Through collaborative efforts, associated costs in disseminating information during these unplanned events were primarily salaries and mileage expenses. The recent wildfire event required overtime, however staff worked flexible schedules to keep overtime hours at a minimum. During the H1N1 pandemic, the reallocation of staff and prioritizing workloads kept salary costs the same.

There were no additional costs incurred when DEHS staff distributed flyers to food facilities within their districts. This was accomplished during their normal course of duty. The cost of the flyers was covered by the Public Health Preparedness and Response Program.

There were no direct costs associated with the use of the Cal Trans illuminated signs to display the Public Health notification. Due to the collaborative effort with Cal Trans, DEHS did not incur any operating costs. The "re-entry" kits that were distributed to mountain residents were provided by the Public Health Preparedness and Response Program, and were funded through awarded grants. The use of an existing "Telephone Emergency Notification System" did not incur any additional costs to the Department budget.

Costs for mass email distribution and website notification were included in the Departments monthly allocation and did not result in an increase cost. Using the previously compiled information from an existing database program saved staff time and resources when disseminating the necessary information.

6. The Results/Success of the Program

DEHS recognizes and understands that communication is extremely important when working to mitigate any unplanned event. Our goal is to ensure critical information reaches the greatest number of affected County residents during this crucial time; to protect, reduce, and eliminate the risk to public health and safety. Our systematic approach to gauge the situation, evaluate resources, determine challenges, and react accordingly has been proven to be the most effective method. However, this approach must be immediately modified to develop an individual communication strategy.

During the recent disastrous wildfire, DEHS was tasked with reaching approximately 35,000 displaced residents with over 10,000 threatened homes. Reaching thousands of residents posed a challenge. The creative and innovative use of existing resources allowed us to achieve this goal. The following methods were used to successfully reach our residents:

- Approximately 35,000 people viewed the electronic illuminated Cal Trans signs
- 5,000 "re-entry" kits were distributed
- 10,000 – 15,000 flyers were distributed at specified locations
- Food safety flyer information was broadcasted by multiple news agencies reaching thousands of residents throughout the County

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- Approximately 8,200 households were reached using the “Reverse 911 System”

The Department of Public Health and the Division of Environmental Health Services played a major role in protecting the public’s health and safety. DEHS did not receive any food borne illness complaints from the residents during this time, thereby confirming our efforts to educate the community were a success. In addition, the County Board of Supervisors recognized our proactive and reactive efforts during a period of great uncertainty.

The H1N1 pandemic also demonstrated a challenge in reaching a large population. While keeping our main objective in mind, decreasing the spread of the virus was a major concern. Staff worked expediently and diligently to distribute the flyer to food facilities.

- Approximately 3,000 facilities received the flyer by email within the first hour of notification
- Approximately 7,000 permitted food facilities (markets and restaurants) received the H1N1 informational flyer within a 48 hour timeframe

Although we had a limited number of DEHS staff, this did not hinder our ability to reach thousands of food service workers in such a short time. Customers were also educated and benefitted from this distribution.

Due to the proactive approach to pre-screen children before leaving for camp, an outbreak of H1N1 was prevented. Some of the children from a previous group at the camp were ill and were confirmed as positive cases of H1N1.

7. Worthiness of an Award

Through our systematic approach, DEHS was able to fill in the gaps and utilize existing County services to effectively and efficiently communicate with our residents during times of critical unplanned events. DEHS was successful in enhancing our ability to provide time sensitive information to the public by using a systematic approach to gauge the situation, evaluate resources, determine obstacles, and react accordingly.

During critical unplanned events, such as the recent wildfire and the Influenza A H1N1 pandemic, our Division successfully utilized unique strategies which were tailored specifically to individual incidents. These strategies facilitated our ability to communicate and decrease the risk to public health and safety. DEHS will continue to develop innovative methods by using available resources and technology. This will continue to open the lines of communication between our Division and County residents.