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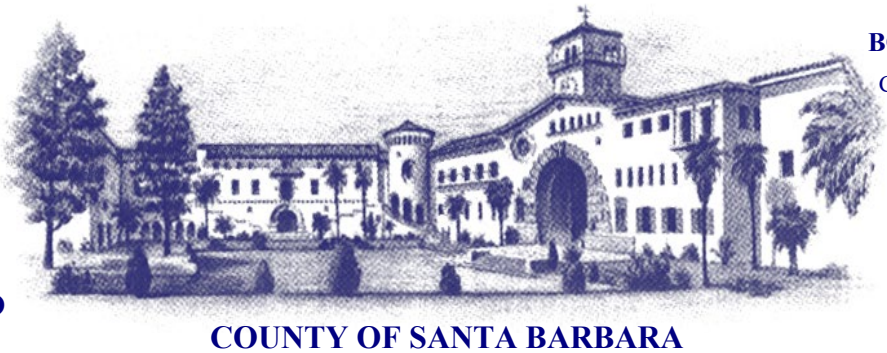
ROY LEE
First District

LAURA CAPPS
Second District

JOAN HARTMANN
Third District, Vice Chair

BOB NELSON
Fourth District, Chair

STEVE LAVAGNINO
Fifth District



COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
County Administration Building
105 East Anapamu Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
Telephone: (805) 568-2190
www.countyofsb.org

August 26, 2026

Honorable Patricia Kelly
Presiding Judge
Santa Barbara Superior Court
County Courthouse
1100 Anacapa Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Reference: Response to Santa Barbara Civil Grand Jury report titled, "Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management - Is the County Neglecting Emergency Preparedness?"

Judge Kelly:

Please find attached the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors (Board) response to the above referenced Civil Grand Jury Report. As directed by the Grand Jury, all responses are provided in accordance with Section 933.05 of the California Penal Code (PC). Pursuant to PC Section 933 (c) and (d), responses are provided on behalf of the Board of Supervisors.

Sincerely,

Signed by:
Bob Nelson
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Bob Nelson, Chair
Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors

cc: Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors

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Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors
Response to the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury 2025-26 Report
"Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management - Is the County Neglecting Emergency Preparedness?"

The County of Santa Barbara acknowledges and appreciates the Grand Jury's review of the County's emergency preparedness programs and its recommendations for continued improvement. Emergency preparedness is a critical responsibility of County government, and the County remains committed to maintaining a comprehensive, coordinated, and continually improving emergency management system.

As reflected in the responses below, the County does not agree with several of the conclusions reached in the report or with the broader characterization that emergency preparedness has been neglected. Santa Barbara County maintains established emergency management plans, Emergency Operations Center (EOC) capabilities, Disaster Service Worker programs, training and exercise requirements, mutual aid systems, public alert and warning capabilities, and partnerships with local, state, federal, nonprofit, and community organizations. These systems have been developed and exercised over many years and continue to support the County's ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies and disasters.

At the same time, the County recognizes that emergency preparedness requires continuous evaluation and improvement. Opportunities exist to strengthen training participation, departmental accountability, planning, documentation, staffing analysis, and coordination across the Operational Area. The County is actively addressing these areas and, where appropriate, will undertake additional evaluation to ensure resources and organizational structures remain aligned with current and future emergency management needs.

Finding 1
The placement of Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management (SBCOEM) as a subordinate division within the Santa Barbara County Fire Department is negatively impacting the ability of SBCOEM to fulfill program responsibilities.

The Board of Supervisors disagrees.
The Board of Supervisors disagrees that placement of the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) within the Santa Barbara County Fire Department negatively impacts OEM's ability to fulfill its statutory responsibilities. The Grand Jury Report does not establish a causal relationship between the County's organizational structure and the concerns identified.

Docusign Envelope ID: 9FA66858-0309-8302-82CD-B0881D0AF86B

Santa Barbara County utilizes an integrated emergency management model that aligns emergency planning, preparedness, response, recovery, training, and operational coordination within the Fire Department. The Fire Department operates within the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) and National Incident Management System (NIMS) on a daily basis and routinely coordinates with local, state, federal, and Operational Area partners.

Integrating OEM within the Fire Department strengthens coordination between emergency planning and operational response while maintaining executive oversight through the County Executive Office. This organizational model promotes collaboration across Fire Operations, Fire Prevention, Emergency Medical Services, the Regional Fire Communications Center, emergency planning, and EOC coordination, reducing duplication of effort while improving operational readiness and promoting fiscal stability. The County is one of six counties in California that follow this organizational model, including Imperial, Kern, Kings, Marin, and San Bernadino counties.
Like all County programs, OEM continues to evolve through continuous improvement; however, the County does not agree that its organizational placement has impaired OEM's ability to accomplish its mission.

Recommendation 1
The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct the CEO to return SBCOEM to a direct-report position. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or reasonable.
The Board of Supervisors believes the current organizational placement of OEM provides significant operational and organizational benefits by integrating emergency management with one of the County's primary emergency response agencies. Changing the reporting relationship would reduce operational integration without addressing the organizational improvements identified by the Grand Jury.

The County will continue strengthening executive coordination, countywide governance, and Operational Area emergency management responsibilities while maintaining the existing organizational structure.

Finding 2
Current staffing at Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management (SBCOEM) is not sufficient to meet all program responsibilities.

The Board of Supervisors disagrees.

Docusign Envelope ID: 9FA66858-0309-8302-82CD-B0881D0AF86B

The Board of Supervisors disagrees. This report does not include an objective workload analysis demonstrating that existing staffing levels prevent the County from performing required emergency management functions. Placement in the Fire Department provides even more resources to support OEM with an entire fleet of emergency trained firefighters to support OEM staff during an emergency.

Appropriate staffing should be determined through evaluation of statutory responsibilities, operational workload, service expectations, organizational efficiencies, available technology, shared departmental resources, and available funding, not by prescribing a predetermined staffing level.

The County remains committed to ensuring emergency management resources are appropriately aligned with operational needs and will continue evaluating organizational effectiveness as part of its ongoing management responsibilities. See also response to Recommendation No. 2 below.

Recommendation 2

The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors increase SBCOEM staffing to 12 full-time employees. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

This recommendation requires further analysis.

The County will retain an independent consultant with expertise in emergency management organizational assessments to conduct a comprehensive review of the OEM program.

The assessment will evaluate:

- statutory responsibilities;
- operational workload;
- staffing assignments;
- service levels;
- organizational efficiencies;
- shared departmental resources;
- coordination with other County departments and Operational Area partners; and,
- long-term organizational needs.

Upon completion of the assessment, the County will determine whether staffing, organizational, or resource adjustments are warranted.

Finding 3

SBCOEM does not currently have a fully trained cadre of 204 Disaster Service Workers (DSW) that can report to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) when needed for extended activations.

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The Board of Supervisors disagrees.
The Board of Supervisors disagrees that it lacks a trained cadre of DSWs capable of supporting EOC activations.

Santa Barbara County maintains policies, procedures, and training requirements governing DSW assignments through Chapter 12 of the Santa Barbara County Code, the Countywide Disaster Service Worker Policy, and the annually updated Operational Area Integrated Preparedness Plan.

Emergency management training is a continuous process requiring ongoing recruitment, position-specific instruction, exercises, and refresher training due to employee turnover and changing operational requirements. The existence of continual training requirements does not indicate an absence of operational capability.

The County maintains the organizational framework necessary to staff and operate the EOC during emergency activations while continually improving preparedness through annual planning, training, and exercises.

Recommendation 3a
The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct SBCOEM to implement an EOC Training & Exercise Program that provides a regular, annual training and exercise schedule for at least 204 county DSWs. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

This recommendation has been implemented.
The Board of Supervisors has implemented this recommendation through Chapter 12 of the Santa Barbara County Code, the Countywide Disaster Service Worker Policy, and the annually updated Santa Barbara County Operational Area Integrated Preparedness Plan. These documents establish annual EOC training, position-specific instruction, exercises, compliance tracking, and preparedness activities coordinated by OEM.

Recommendation 3b
The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct the CEO to require all department heads ensure selected County Disaster Service Worker staff participate in a SBCOEM EOC Training and Exercise Program. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

This recommendation has been implemented.
The Countywide Disaster Service Worker Policy requires department heads to identify EOC personnel, maintain staffing depth, ensure assigned employees complete required training, and provide employees with sufficient time to complete that training.

Docusign Envelope ID: 9FA66858-0309-8302-82CD-B0881D0AF86B

Recommendation 3c

The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors ensure department head cooperation in the SBCOEM Training and Exercise Program by adding the 2025-2026 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury 14 DSW participation requirement to their annual performance review process. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

This recommendation has been implemented.

County policy establishes management accountability for Disaster Service Worker preparedness by requiring Department Heads to ensure compliance with required emergency management training. Management performance evaluations include responsibility for meeting these preparedness requirements.

Finding 4

Because inspection, training and exercise responsibilities of oil and gas facilities was removed from SBCOEM and shifted to the County Fire Department, Fire Prevention Division approximately 10 years ago, the County is not in compliance with the Santa Barbara County Operational Area Oil Spill Contingency Plan.

The Board of Supervisors disagrees.

The Board of Supervisors disagrees that reassignment of certain oil and gas preparedness responsibilities resulted in noncompliance with the Santa Barbara County Operational Area Oil Spill Contingency Plan.

The current organizational model places oil spill planning, inspections, hazardous materials expertise, emergency operations, fire prevention, and operational response within one department while allowing OEM to coordinate EOC activities, planning, public information, and recovery.

Personnel assigned these responsibilities possess the operational qualifications, hazardous materials expertise, fire prevention knowledge, and Incident Command System credentials necessary to fulfill the County's preparedness and response obligations.

This integrated model enhances coordination and operational readiness while maintaining clear responsibilities for Unified Command and EOC coordination.

Recommendation 4a

The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors relocate the Oil and Gas Program back to SBCOEM. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or reasonable.

Docusign Envelope ID: 9FA66858-0309-8302-82CD-B0881D0AF86B

The Board of Supervisors believes the current organizational placement provides operational efficiencies, improves preparedness, strengthens coordination between planning and response, and avoids unnecessary duplication of responsibilities.

To further strengthen the program, the Fire Department will update the Operational Area Oil Spill Contingency Plan and related response plans in coordination with local, state, and federal partner agencies to ensure responsibilities, notification procedures, and Unified Command processes remain current.

Recommendation 4b

The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct SBCOEM to participate in Unified Command during any future oil spill incidents. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

This recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or reasonable.

Unified Command participation is appropriately carried out through the Fire Department's designated Local Government On-Scene Coordinator, who represents the County during oil spill incidents while maintaining coordination with the County EOC and OEM.

The Board of Supervisors believes this structure provides clear operational leadership while ensuring OEM fulfills its countywide coordination responsibilities through the EOC.

Finding 5

Because SBCOEM does not currently have an active Disaster Service Worker Volunteer (DSW-V) Program as provided for by the California Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES), the County is not taking advantage of valuable volunteer resources.

The Board of Supervisors disagrees.

The Board of Supervisors disagrees that it is not utilizing valuable volunteer resources.

Santa Barbara County actively coordinates with numerous volunteer organizations through established Operational Area partnerships, including the Santa Barbara County Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), the Medical Reserve Corps, Sheriff's Search and Rescue, Animal Services volunteer programs, the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Project Camp, and numerous community-based organizations.

Chapter 12 of the Santa Barbara County Code authorizes the use of Disaster Service Worker Volunteers and provides the framework for coordinating volunteer resources during emergencies.

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While opportunities exist to further formalize registration and administrative processes for DSW Volunteers, the County currently utilizes volunteer resources through established partnerships and existing emergency management programs.

Recommendation 5

The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct SBCOEM to restore a comprehensive DSW-V Program that registers, trains, and utilizes the services of local volunteer emergency communication organizations. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

This recommendation requires further analysis.

Chapter 12 of the Santa Barbara County Code authorizes the use of Disaster Service Worker Volunteers and provides the framework for coordinating volunteer resources during emergencies. The Board of Supervisors will include DSW Volunteer programs within the independent organizational assessment described in the County's response to Recommendation 2.

The assessment will evaluate opportunities to further formalize volunteer registration, credentialing, training, deployment, and management while leveraging existing Operational Area partnerships, avoiding duplication of services, and strengthening volunteer support capabilities where appropriate.