Response to 2025-26 Grand Jury Report

Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management – Is the County Neglecting Emergency Preparedness?

Board of Supervisors

August 25, 2026

County Executive Office
Fire Department

one COUNTY one FUTURE

Summary

- On June 16, 2026, Grand Jury distributed report titled “Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management: Is the County Neglecting Emergency Preparedness?
- Report focused on OEM staffing, funding, and organizational structure
- Includes 5 findings and 8 recommendations
- Board must respond within 90 days

Background

- OEM is a division of the County Fire Department whose role is to aid the County in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from natural and human-made disasters
- OEM works with local, state, and federal partners in emergency planning, training, exercises, response, and recovery
- Grand Jury report reviewed OEM's staffing levels, funding, and their organizational move from the County Executive Office to the Fire Department
- Recommends increasing OEM's staffing and Disaster Service Worker team, stronger CEO support, restoring OEM's role in oil and gas activities, and renewing collaboration with volunteers

Finding 1

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.*

Disagree.

- Integrating OEM within Fire strengthens coordination between emergency planning and operational response
- Promotes collaboration across Fire Operations, Fire Prevention, Emergency Medical Services, the Regional Fire Communications Center, emergency planning, and EOC coordination
- Reduces duplication of effort, improves operational readiness, and promotes fiscal stability

Recommendation 1

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.*

Will not be implemented.

- Keeping OEM within Fire provides significant operational and organizational benefits
- Changing this relationship would reduce operational integration

Finding 2

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

Disagree.

- Fire can readily integrate with OEM to provide support during an emergency
- Continue evaluating organizational effectiveness

Recommendation 2

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.*

Requires further analysis.

- Consultant assessment underway to evaluate OEM staffing, workload, resources, and long-term needs
- Upon completion, the County will determine whether adjustments are warranted

Finding 3

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.*

Disagree.

- The County maintains policies, procedures, and training requirements of the Countywide Disaster Service Worker Policy and the Operational Area Integrated Preparedness Plan
- Training is continuous
- The County maintains the organizational framework necessary to staff and operate the EOC during emergency activations

Recommendation 3a

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.*

Implemented.

- Trainings required by the Countywide Disaster Service Worker Policy and the Santa Barbara County Operational Area Integrated Preparedness Plan
- OEM coordinates annual EOC training, position-specific instruction, exercises, compliance tracking, and preparedness activities

Recommendation 3b

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.*

Implemented.

- County policy requires department heads to identify EOC personnel, maintain staffing depth, ensure assigned employees complete required training, and provide employees with time to complete training

Recommendation 3c

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.*

Implemented.

- County policy establishes management accountability for Disaster Service Worker preparedness
- Department heads are responsible for compliance with required emergency management training
- Management performance evaluations include responsibility for meeting preparedness requirements

Finding 4

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.*

Disagree.

- Current organizational model places oil spill planning, inspections, hazardous materials expertise, emergency operations, fire prevention, and operational response within Fire
- Personnel have operational qualifications, hazardous materials expertise, fire prevention knowledge, and ICS credentials needed to fulfill the County's obligations
- Current model enhances coordination and operational readiness and maintains clear responsibilities for Unified Command and EOC coordination

Recommendation 4a

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.*

Will not be implemented.

- Current organizational model provides operational efficiencies, improves preparedness, strengthens coordination between planning and response, and avoids duplication of responsibilities
- Fire will update the Operational Area Oil Spill Contingency Plan and related response plans to ensure processes and procedures remain current

Recommendation 4b

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.*

Will not be implemented.

- Unified Command participation carried out by Fire's Local Government On-Scene Coordinator
- Represents County during oil spill incidents and coordinates with the EOC and OEM
- Provides clear operational leadership and ensures OEM fulfills its countywide coordination responsibilities through the EOC

Finding 5

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.*

Disagree.

- The County utilizes volunteer resources through established partnerships and existing emergency management programs
- Coordinates with volunteer organizations
- The County Disaster Service Worker Policy authorizes use of Disaster Service Worker Volunteers and provides the framework for coordinating volunteer resources during emergencies

Recommendation 5

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.*

Requires further analysis.

- County policy authorizes use of Disaster Service Worker Volunteers and provides framework for coordinating volunteer resources during emergencies
- OEM organizational assessment will evaluate opportunities to further formalize volunteer registration, credentialing, training, deployment, and management while leveraging existing Operational Area partnerships

Recommended Actions

a) Consider and adopt the responses in Attachment A as the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors' response to the 2025-26 Grand Jury report entitled "Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management: Is the County Neglecting Emergency Preparedness?";

b) Authorize the Chair to sign the letter included in Attachment A, and forward the letter and responses to the Presiding Judge of Santa Barbara County Superior Court; and

c) Determine pursuant to CEQA Guidelines 15378(b)(5) that the above actions are not a project subject to CEQA review because they are government administrative activities that do not result in direct or indirect physical changes to the environment.

Questions?