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Chasing the Pandemic

Role of Testing and Contact Tracing

Summary

Public health officials work to keep healthy people healthy, keep them from being exposed to infectious people and work to get sick people proper treatment. How to tell which people are healthy and which are not is where testing and contact tracing comes into play.

This Report is the Santa Cruz County Grand Jury's assessment of the effectiveness of the County's COVID-19 testing and contact tracing efforts. We found that the Public Health officials in the county government are experienced professionals who met high expectations and did, indeed, mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic by promoting testing and tracing in Santa Cruz County. The county instituted a pandemic crisis management initiative called "Save Lives Santa Cruz County" much like a crisis center established during a wildfire.

The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency publicize their efforts to keep the residents healthy during a pandemic.

Background

We have been thick in the middle of a worldwide virus-driven infectious and deadly disease (COVID-19) during 2020-2021 – a pandemic.^[1] There is an unrelenting tension between efforts to isolate people from one another to avoid virus spread and to allow people to perform those interactive activities that make us a functioning society.

There are basically four things that can be done to slow or stop an epidemic:

1. Isolate infected people.
2. Urge everyone to follow procedures like wearing masks and social distancing to slow or stop the silent movement of viruses from one person to another.
3. Conduct extensive testing and contact tracing in order to identify those at risk.
4. Develop and deliver vaccines.

Importance of Testing and Contact Tracing

It is undeniable that testing and contact tracing saves lives but is nearly impossible to quantify. Lives are saved by reducing the spread when public health officials call for more testing. Testing and tracing can stop an epidemic dead in its tracks in cases when contact tracing moves faster than the infection can spread. In those cases it is clear that lives were saved. Unfortunately, this is not the situation for COVID-19.^{[2] [3] [4]}

Our investigation focused on testing and contact tracing in large part because we found it complex, critically important and not well publicized.

Testing and Contact Tracing

Who is in charge of testing and contact tracing in Santa Cruz County? Well, nobody and everybody! Our Local Health Jurisdiction is operated by the Public Health Division (PHD), a division of the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency (HSA).^[5] It is a part of the nationwide public health infrastructure, responsible for implementing mandates from federal, state and local sources.^{[6] [7]} A Local Health Officer of the County is legally empowered to issue binding health orders.^[7]

Who is doing testing is quite different from who is doing contact tracing.

Testing

Let's talk first about testing; that is, testing to see if a person actually has the COVID-19 infectious disease. The PHD seldom does any testing itself. So who does? Well that's where the "everybody" comes in and it includes:

- Dominican Hospital and Watsonville Community Hospital (we have those 2),
- healthcare clinics (we have 7 federally qualified healthcare centers),
- healthcare companies like Sutter/PAMF, Dignity, and Kaiser (we have those 3),
- skilled nursing facilities (of which we have 7),
- residential healthcare facilities (of which we have over 30),

- detention facilities (of which we have 6),
- schools (more than 27 private and 57 public),
- drug stores and grocery stores (3 chain drug stores, 5 groceries chains with pharmacies),
- other healthcare facilities like doctors' offices (a large number),
- special testing sites established by the state and organized more locally (we have 2),
- and even individuals in their own homes.

This is the “everybody.” Is this diversity/complexity good or not? We attempt to shed light on this question in the Investigation section below.

The Two Parts to Testing

All of these places do not produce test results directly on site. They collect specimens from the patients and most send the obtained specimens to licensed clinic laboratories that must have a Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA) certification.^[8] Some offer testing with on-site results. There are rules and laws requiring that every test be logged into a state Internet based website/database.^[9] This is, in part, to enable contact tracing. Becoming a CLIA certified site includes being able to register all test results with the state. Some companies who sell on-site tests also offer tools for registering results with the state.

Contact Tracing

Contact tracing is a labor intensive activity: gathering information from an infected person and attempting to contact each person they might have infected. Unlike testing, this is inherently a centralized activity orchestrated by our PHD and includes HSA personnel as well as volunteers.^[10] Tracers access the state database and follow all reported positive cases.

Other Government Health Agencies

There are four other government health agencies that influence our local healthcare infrastructure: the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),^[11] the Food and Drug Administration (FDA),^[12] The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)^[13] and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH).^[14] More about these agencies is discussed in context of the Investigation section below.

There is much more to tell about testing and contact tracing in Santa Cruz County, the healthcare infrastructure including the requirement for a local fast-turnaround laboratory, and how well the public has been informed about COVID-19 related activities. As investigators, we found we were rather uninformed before we started. A well written article from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services lays out the scope of local public health organizations.^[15]

Scope and Methodology

The Grand Jury conducted many interviews. We sought to understand what testing is done in the county, where it is done and how citizens get tested. We also dug into what testing is all about and how the federal efforts, in the early days of the pandemic, thwarted local efforts and set the direction for testing and contact tracing for the rest of the pandemic.^{[16] [17]}

The investigation reviewed a few documents from people interviewed. The investigation also looked at a large number of reports, data and media articles found on the Internet. This opened and deepened our understanding and our view of the United States public health infrastructure and history, and how it impacts our local public health programs.

Investigation

Terminology Check

In the discussion that follows and in order to be precise, we offer the following:

- Viruses are officially named by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses and on February 11, 2020 they named the one that has caused the 2020-2021 pandemic “SARS-CoV-2” (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2).^[18]
- Diseases are officially named by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the International Classification of Diseases and they named the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus “COVID-19” also on February 11, 2020.^[18]

CDC and Laboratory Tests to Detect SARS-CoV-2

The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA)^[12] must give approval to the manufacturers of most medical equipment, medicines and procedures before they can be deployed. In addition, laboratories that process specimens taken from patients must also obtain a Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA) license from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.^{[8] [19]}

Before the start of 2020 there were no mass tests devised to detect if a person was infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus. On January 13, 2020 the WHO published a recipe from a WHO partner laboratory for how to configure such a test, a reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test.^[20] Concurrently the U.S. CDC began to develop its own recipe for a RT-PCR test for distribution to laboratories in the U.S. This CDC effort has been the standard practice in the past for other infectious diseases. It is a testament to the US researchers’ scientific knowledge and skill that the tests were developed quickly.

The CDC obtained an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) from the FDA for its testing process on February 4, 2020 and soon thereafter began shipping the necessary reagents and instructions to U.S. laboratories – “testing kits.”^[21] Soon, after 120 laboratories began to use the CDC materials, the tests were found to produce too many

false positives (detected the disease falsely). Use of the tests was halted and caused the country to miss approximately 47 days of testing at the very early stages of the pandemic when testing is most critical.^[22] The CDC plan was for the tests to be more sensitive than the WHO test, and also include checks for influenza. Making a more complicated test was a contributor to the delay.^[16] There was also a report of contamination in one of their laboratories.^{[23][17]} Weeks were spent within the CDC research laboratories to find a fix for the test and by February 26, 2020 the CDC again began shipping its kits.^[16]

The main point for explaining this is that clinical laboratories in the U.S. were expecting to use the methods and supplies that would be provided by the CDC as they had done many times in the past; this time to test for SARS-CoV-2.

The CDC delay contributed to the FDA decision to relax its rules allowing private companies to develop and market tests based upon self assessment.^[24] Under self assessment, the quality of the tests mirrors the quality and honesty of the company producing them and the quality of the tests available using an EUA varies from *nearly useless* to comparable to the final version of the CDC tests. If the FDA had certified tests as being effective rather than by self assessment, it could have been a boon.

This FDA offer of EUA's opened the floodgates for hundreds of companies to offer tests of undetermined value making a complex situation even more confusing. By April 23, 2021, 358 tests and sample collection devices had been authorized by the FDA under EUAs. See [Appendix A](#).

Testing to Prevent Breakouts (Diagnostic Testing)

Healthcare Facilities

Hospitals, doctors' offices, urgent care centers and any other place where sick people go for care, have to protect themselves from a contagious disease breakout. A breakout in one of these places not only impacts the people who get the disease but it will likely shut down the facility for weeks. They need to know if a new arrival has, say, COVID-19, within minutes not days. So shipping test specimens off to laboratories just doesn't work. Those laboratories were so busy that their delays sometimes reached a week or more. Below we discuss how scientists at the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC) Molecular Diagnostic Laboratory did the extraordinary thing of establishing a local authorized fast-turnaround commercial facility.^[25]

Congregate Living Facilities

Of concern for breakouts equal to that of healthcare facilities are congregate living establishments, like skilled nursing facilities, residential healthcare facilities and detention facilities. One infected person in these close living quarters can infect the whole place in a matter of a day or two. If all the residents are COVID-19 free and do not leave the facility, then the real risk is the staff and caregivers who come and go from their own homes. County programs were put in place to test the non-resident workers of these facilities regularly.^[26]

Our Local Response

During the spring of 2020 the pandemic was still very modest in the United States compared to the end of 2020. At a peak in April, over 34,000 cases a day were reported in the US. At the end of July 2020 there was another peak at 70,000 new cases every day and by the first week in January 2021 a peak of nearly 260,000 new cases a day were logged.^[27] California and Santa Cruz County both followed these national patterns.

In spring 2020, our local public health officials, as well as other groups such as the Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County,^[28] Community Health Centers^[29] and researchers and administrators at UCSC,^[25] were concerned that the county would not be prepared if the pandemic developed more rapidly and more intensely. As early as April 10, 2020 the Director of the HSA drafted a call to action to prepare for the more serious phases of the pandemic to come. See [Appendix B](#).

The Lab

Prominent among needs facing the county was for a local fast-turnaround PCR^[30] testing laboratory. UCSC is famous for its DNA research^[31] and its talented scientists^[25] were anxious to work toward developing a COVID-19 test. They felt that they could build a local testing laboratory to return results within 24 to 48 hours when the typical commercial laboratories were taking 4 days or more. Commercial laboratories were suffering from a lack of available resources to conduct the diagnostics concurrent with a demand surge. COVID-19 test results are not useful when they take more than a couple of days.

The UCSC scientists also felt they could develop a testing procedure that would not require chemicals in short supply at most of the nation's testing laboratories.^[32] A UCSC chancellor and dean supported this idea to be able to get fast turn around for specimens from the UCSC Student Health Department as well as helping the underserved in the county. The Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County and the Public Health Division of the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency supported the laboratory to overcome emergency certification hurdles and by paying for the individual tests.

The UCSC effort culminated on May 1, 2020 when they opened for business processing specimens from the Student Health Center, the two Community Health Centers and Salud Para La Gente.^[33] By July 9, 2020 the PHD had arranged for \$620,906 of CARES Act funds to buy equipment for the laboratory.^[34] The laboratory gradually ramped up its capacity. By August 2020 they planned to be able to process 600-800 specimens per day after using additional PHD CARES Act funds of \$805,049 to purchase more equipment.^{[32] [35]}

The University paid for testing at the Student Health Center. The Community Foundation paid for tests for the Santa Cruz establishments and was reimbursed 80% by the Federal Emergency Management Agency until late fall when the PHD took over making those payments out of the CARES Act funding. With expanded capacity in late

2020, the PHD advanced \$200,000 for testing at detention centers, the East Cliff Family Health Center, all the skilled nursing facilities, and the Homeless People's Health Project.^{[36] [26]}

Creation of the UCSC COVID-19 Laboratory received recognition. Less well known is the amount of financial support arranged by the Health Services Agency and the Community Foundation.

PHD Early Response

In June 2020, the PHD notified their health system and their laboratory partners that they would request funds available from the CARES Act for those partners to buy enhanced testing equipment and supplies.^{[37] [26]}

- Watsonville Community Hospital purchased a Biofire Film Array Torch System and additional testing modules.^[38]
- The HSA Emeline Clinic Laboratory purchased BD Max and Biofire systems.^{[39] [38]}
- As noted above, the UCSC Laboratory bought equipment to establish and expand their testing system.
- Dominican Hospital was able to cover the costs of their own testing equipment.

Testing without a Laboratory

In many cases, laboratory turnaround of one or two days is too long. The pressure for quick testing spurred the development of antigen tests^[30] that could be evaluated on the spot, much like a pregnancy test. Examples of these tests are the Abbott BinaxNow^{[40] [41]} and the Becton Dickinson Veritor.^[42] During October 2020 and November 2020 the PHD purchased 1,000 of these and made them available to detention facilities, to two Federally Qualified Health Centers – Salud Para La Gente and the East Cliff Family Health Center – to all the skilled nursing facilities in the county and to the Homeless People's Health Project.^{[26] [43]}

Later in 2020 the PHD made an additional 1,500 antigen test kits available.^[26] By April 2021, the PHD had delivered over 23,000 kits.^[44] These give test results within 15 minutes and do not require any equipment except the material supplied in a “kit.”^[40] The tests are not as good as the laboratory processed PCR tests but if a person is found positive with a BinaxNOW or Becton Dickinson test they can be re-tested with a PCR test for a more definitive answer.^[45] These “quick” tests augmented the laboratory PCR testing provided at UCSC.

Further, the PHD created websites (also called “kits” but with a different meaning) for skilled nursing and residential healthcare facilities to help them maneuver the complex state and other government requirements instituted to prevent breakouts in such homes.^{[46] [47]}

Limits to Testing Due to Limited Supplies

For the better part of 2020 the CDC recommended diagnostic testing only for those people who:

1. currently have symptoms of COVID-19, or
2. have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive, or
3. were recommended to have a test by a doctor or other health professional.^[48]

During that period the majority of testing in the county was to prevent breakouts.^[49]

Only one site in the county, the Ramsey Park State testing site in Watsonville, circumvented these recommendations. They provided a COVID-19 test for an individual without meeting the restrictive CDC criteria or without being an established patient/member of a healthcare organization. A second state sponsored site was established at the Santa Cruz Civic Center in late December 2020. These state testing sites have enabled more surveillance testing for vulnerable groups.^[50] In 2021 the limits to testing became more relaxed but many sites still required a doctor's referral.^[51]

Asymptomatic Infection

From the early days of the COVID-19 disease in January 2020, there was concern that a person could be infected and infect others without showing symptoms (asymptomatic). Typically a person is infectious a couple of days before showing symptoms but it became clear that some people became infected, had a course of the disease, and never knew it. As many as 40% of those that have been infected were asymptomatic.^[52] ^[53] So, for example, if 10 cases of infection were detected in your community on one day, there could be another 3-4 cases that went undetected. These undetected people make controlling the spread of the virus nearly impossible if people congregate in groups.

Why Test Apparently Healthy People?

There are several reasons why the restrictions on who could get tested have been detrimental to fighting the virus. The only way to find asymptomatic, yet infected, people is to test people that appear healthy. For example, the regular "surveillance" testing in aggregate living facilities has been one path to finding asymptomatic people.^[54]

Routine testing of essential workers, especially those that work in close contact with others, finds asymptomatic infected cases if done often enough.^[55] The Santa Cruz County Jail has had no breakouts of COVID-19 among inmates because of testing staff and inmates alike, and doing contact tracing.^[56] Other local agencies, especially those concerned with underserved communities, urged everyone to go to one of the state sites for testing (Ramsey Park and Santa Cruz Civic Center).^[57]

Contact Tracing

Testing and contact tracing are decades old established public health practices for combating contagious disease breakouts by isolating and treating infected people.^[26]

Contact tracing is a labor intensive activity. Interviewing an infected person to gather contact information and attempting to contact each person they could likely have infected requires skill, patience and time. Testing and tracing is a required element of the CDC's ten essential services needed to promote and protect public health and to which the HSA Public Health Division subscribes.^[58] The numbers of people tested proportional to the population has also been one of the criteria used by the State of California to determine the "color-coded tier" controlling the openness allowed in each county.^[59]

When done early in a breakout, testing and contact tracing can slow or stop the breakout, saving lives and suffering. A breakout can grow to a level where tracing becomes futile. However, as a breakout comes under control, testing and tracing can, again, be an effective means to eliminate the disease entirely.^{[60] [61]} Testing is also the primary means to gather statistics for guiding future actions.

Testing and contact tracing are also effective in closed-group situations such as healthcare sites, skilled nursing facilities, assisted living facilities, jails, schools, etc. Success in avoiding a breakout in the County Jail is exemplary.^[56] Regular and frequent testing can assure small groups that they are free of risk to their members and others: groups such as essential workers which must occupy a common indoor space, grocery store employees, farm workers, farmer's market workers, construction crews, etc. See [Appendix A](#).

Reviewing the Actions taken by Santa Cruz County Public Health Division

As was noted in the earlier Background section, the Santa Cruz County Public Health Division (PHD)^{[62] [63]} seldom does any testing itself. It is, however, responsible for the general health and well-being of the residents of the county. Assuring the health of the public is incredibly far reaching, involving medical care, education, contagious diseases, water, waste, power, housing, mental health, and more, all in the broadest sense. For example, housing can include homelessness, home sanitation, heat, water, power and overcrowding which impacts residents' health. Normally the PHD has established liaison and cooperation arrangements with many, if not most, of the other agencies within the county government – a huge effort.^[64]

PHD Reacted Early

Responsible for the local public health in Santa Cruz County,^[6] the PHD keeps an eye on possible epidemics and pandemics that could reach our county. As early as December 2019, even before any cases of COVID-19 were diagnosed in the United States, the PHD was following the COVID-19 breakout in China. Our public health department is local but far from parochial.

Early activities included:

- January 5, 2020: The County Health Officer issued an order suspending elective surgeries and elective procedures due to the COVID-19 pandemic to make sure that our healthcare facilities and healthcare workers would be available and prepared for COVID-19 patients.^[65]
- February 28, 2020: The HSA: Department of Operations Crisis Center was activated.^[66]
- March 9, 2020: The Board of Supervisors declared a County Health Emergency which enables the county to be reimbursed for emergency health activities from the state and federal governments.^[26]
- March 16, 2020: The County Health Officer issued a Shelter in Place Order.^[67]
- April 28, 2020: The PHD announced the Save Lives Santa Cruz County campaign.^[66]
- May 1, 2020: The UCSC Molecular Diagnostic Laboratory (later renamed the Colligan Clinical Diagnostic Laboratory) was issued a CLIA license to operate a COVID-19 testing laboratory with support from the Public Health Division and the Community Foundation.^[25]

By March 17, 2020, the county had only 14 diagnosed cases of COVID-19 and no deaths from the disease. The actions listed above were, indeed, very early as:

- On January 21, 2020 the Center for Disease Control and Prevention declared the first COVID-19 case in the United States.^[68]
- On March 6, 2020 the first case of COVID-19 in Santa Cruz County was registered.^[69]
- On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic.^[1]
- On March 19, 2020 the Governor of California issued an Executive Order to shelter in place. (Before that, on March 16, 2020 the County Health Officer had already issued a Shelter in Place Order.^[67])

Save Lives Santa Cruz

On April 28, 2020, the Director of the HSA announced an initiative called “Save Lives Santa Cruz County.” It was a multi-agency team drawn from a number of agencies, hospitals, etc. who were charged with designing and implementing plans for a county-wide program to fight the pandemic. This program was modelled after those used to manage natural disasters like wildfires.^{[26] [66] [70] [71] [67]} The team reported to the Incident Commander of the Public Health Division Operations Center (DOC). The team consisted of over 160 people who spent at least part time working on DOC initiatives.

The nine planning objectives for the Save Lives program are:^[66]

- Minimize death and illness from COVID-19;
- Mitigate spread of COVID-19;
- Use an equity lens in all decision making;

- Build community capacity for long-term COVID-19 resiliency;
- Ensure health, safety, and welfare of responders and their families;
- Provide a coordinated response with cooperating, allied, and assisting agencies;
- Provide consistent and accurate guidance to healthcare providers;
- Provide consistent and accurate information to the public; and
- Maintain fiscal responsibility for COVID-19.

The Save Lives program developed operational periods, usually one week long, for which they produced objectives for the upcoming period. Reports from early November 2020 and from April 2021 are available. These period reports contain a “Significant Events” list which includes an impressive summary of the Save Lives Santa Cruz County activities with links to important documents, starting with December 31, 2019. For example, one entry is a reference to a press release from October 29, 2020 noting that the HSA had disbursed \$619,900 of CARES Act funds to organizations supporting the underserved in the county.^{[72] [73]}

At least 30 period objectives including some specific to testing and tracing are in those plans and reflect how professional and effective this team has been:

- *provide targeted COVID-19 testing to special needs cases to mitigate COVID-19 spread and to provide consultation and training services for specific settings (assigned to Rapid Response Team).*
- *ensure increased testing capacity, testing volume, and ease of access to address health equity issues by partnering with local organizations/agencies (assigned to Private Testing Partnerships Teams (UCSC and Salud Para La Gente).*
- *provide clinical expertise regarding testing modalities and supply chain issues (assigned to the HSA Clinical Laboratory).*^{[74] [66]}

PHD and Contact Tracing

On March 26, 2020, the County Health Officer issued an order that requires the results of all COVID-19 tests to be submitted to state public health officials using the California Reportable Disease Information Exchange (CalREDIE) system.^[9] The cases are then transmitted to the state website CalCONNECT for investigation and tracing.^[26] The Health Officer’s Order includes this sentence: “By sharing high quality test result data at scale, state and local health authorities can better track COVID-19, predict its spread, and better focus public resources to end this global pandemic.”^[9]

The reports submitted to CalCONNECT include the identification and contact information for the persons tested. PHD case managers have been accessing the CalCONNECT system daily to start management for positive cases found in the county. They assign trained contact tracers to each positive case within 24 hours of when the test was entered into CalCONNECT.

By now we are all familiar with the “exponential” growth phenomena where one person infects two who each infect two, who each infect two and the total numbers infected reaches very high levels in a relatively small number of cycles. The number two is not

special and even greater numbers expand the growth dramatically. This is how epidemics and pandemics happen. Stopping an infected person from infecting others is the key way to break this growth.

Each person who performs contact tracing needs to go through a 20-hour state online training class that typically takes a full week to complete. Additionally, contact tracers are taught to use the online platform CalCONNECT to input their data.^[26]

It was reported that in the summer of 2020 the county had 40 tracers available, growing to 80 in December 2020. On average, one case consumes eight hours of a contact tracer's time.^[26] The number of cases of COVID-19 reported in the county is shown in the graph provided in [Appendix C](#). A sketch of the number of cases assigned to contact tracers is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Cases Assigned to Contact Tracers^[27]

In 2020, From	In 2020, To	Average Daily Cases	Remarks	Cumulative total at end of period
March 6	March 6	1	single day	1
March 17	March 17	13	single day	14
March 23	June 23	4	period peak day: 12	295
June 23	August 31	21	10 days over 40	1,760
September 1	October 31	19	5 days over 40	2,887
November 1	December 31	95	30 days over 100	8,747

These figures show that 40 contact tracers could handle the load during the summer of 2020 up to about the beginning of November 2020. The tracers were not expected to work 24/7 and there were short periods where the numbers exceeded the tracers available but overall tracing was happening close to 100%.

As the number of trained tracers in the county grew to 80 in December, they were beginning to get overwhelmed by the number of reported cases. In addition to the county employees already working on contact tracing, area residents were urged to join the Volunteer Initiative Program.^[10] There are practical limits to how many tracers can be hired and trained. In December the county reached those limits but their goal was still to do contact tracing on 100% of the cases reported. They prioritized cases in congregate settings.^[26] More details on tracing can be found in the Save Lives Period 62 Report.^[75]

COVID-19 Does Not Fit The Model

The ideal scenario for diagnostic testing and contact tracing to prevent breakouts of COVID-19 would be:

1. A person's symptoms are so severe that they visit their personal healthcare facility within a day or two of the onset of symptoms.
2. The healthcare professional takes a specimen from the person and expresses it to a laboratory for testing for COVID-19.
3. The laboratory notifies the healthcare worker of the test results within one or two days.^{[33] [76]}
4. The healthcare professional logs the patient's personal identification information and contact information into a government database together with the results of the test.
5. A case worker who watches the government database picks up this case within one day if the test results were positive.
6. The case worker immediately assigns this case to a trained contact tracer.
7. The original healthcare worker treats the infected person by either prescribing stay at home or care in a hospital.^[26]

In this scenario, the infected person is definitively determined to be infected, or not, in approximately five days from their original infection. The healthcare worker will have advised them to take precautions to avoid infecting other people until the test results are known, lest they test positive.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 disease does not fit the above model very well.

1. Not all infected people seek professional attention; approximately 40% have no symptoms at all – the “asymptomatic” ones.
2. Only some of the infected people that do feel sick, feel bad enough to seek medical help.
3. COVID-19 transmission from person to person is very high, especially in poorly ventilated spaces.
4. People can infect others for about 10-14 days while they are infected.
5. The turnaround time for just the laboratory results can be more than four days. The time from when a person gets infected until they are notified that they tested positive can be as long as 10 days and they may not even be infectious by the time the results are received.^[26]

These difficulties mean testing and contact tracing do not work as well with COVID-19 as they might. Nonetheless, testing and contact tracing still save lives by preventing infected persons from infecting others. They also allow people to get early treatment.

The slow turnaround when shipping specimens to laboratories was mitigated in the county by:

- making sure hospitals had the equipment to do their own tests,
- getting a local fast-turnaround laboratory established at UCSC and
- delivering nearly 3,000 results-in-house tests for the congregate facilities.^[26]

The difficulties that COVID-19 presents for testing and tracing emphasize how important it is for people to wear masks and socially distance.^[77]

Santa Cruz Did Well

The state has tracked COVID-19 data county-by-county and makes that data available through a website.^[78] Santa Cruz County has done much better than most other counties in the state according to data extracted from this website on April 30, 2021.

Santa Cruz County is a beach destination for people outside the county on weekends, holidays and for vacations. At those times, the population swells well beyond the permanent resident count used for reporting cases per 100,000 population. The objective of stay-at-home orders is to slow the movement and mingling of people. Santa Cruz might have done worse than most other counties in the state – *instead, Table 2 shows it had one of the best records.*

**Table 2. California COVID-19 Data by County,
March 1, 2020 through April 30, 2021^[78]**

Measure	Santa Cruz County	Range for All Counties	n th Best of 58
Cases/100K	5,825	4,650 up to 17,096	20 th
Deaths/100K	95	0 up to 376	26 th
Test logged/100K	534	80 up to 1,248	11 th
Testing Positivity Rate	0.6%	0.0% up to 9.6%	7 th

Santa Cruz County did not have its 10th COVID-19 death until 9/16/2020.

Santa Cruz County did really well at testing compared to all other counties in the state.

Freedom and Money

The County Health Officer's stay-at-home order impinged on some residents' sense of *freedom*. They disrupted a Board of Supervisors' meeting where the County Health Officer attended, prompting the Sheriff to tell her not to come to any more Board meetings in person because he could not guarantee her safety. People protested outside her private residence and at the home of the Director of HSA, making both very concerned for their own and their family's safety. They received threats via email as well.^{[79] [80] [81]}

The Health Officer's orders to close the Santa Cruz beaches and curtail surfing were also met with opposition. A nice beach day attracts hundreds of out-of-county people who spend money in the county. People opposed to the beach closings felt that there must be some other way to keep people isolated without impacting the county's economy. Of course, the issue of asking people to stay home versus keeping the economy running has also been a national issue.

Public Information

As early as May 2020 the HSA "Save Lives Santa Cruz County: *Get Tested*" webpage^[82] listed sites where testing was taking place. A typical entry on the webpage list:

Santa Cruz Community Health Centers 21507 E Cliff Drive Santa Cruz, CA 95062 Mon-Thurs 8am – 8 pm, Fri 8am – 4 pm 831-427-3500

On May 23, 2020 there were 13 sites listed which grew to 18 in spring 2021. As of May 2021, the information provided in these entries is inadequate to determine where to get tested. Each person has their own special requirements (as listed below) and has no way of matching them with the listed testing sites' capabilities. The HSA website needs to inform people that each site has different rules and tests offered that may or may not match their needs.

The abilities and rules of each testing site are varied and include options like:

- Drive through
- PCR Test
- Antibody Test
- Immediate turnaround
- No prescription needed
- No insurance required
- No charge
- Turnaround <2 days
- At home mail-in
- Walk-in

Read [Appendix D](#) to understand the complexity of getting a "free" COVID-19 test if you have no symptoms and have not been exposed.

Some sites charge for the tests even though the federal government will generally pay for them.^[83] Throughout 2020 and even leading into 2021, because of CDC rules in place at that time, nearly all of the testing sites would only test symptomatic people or those clearly experiencing some COVID-19 exposure.^[48] Throughout 2021 those restrictions have been relaxed because testing supplies are more available.^[84]

Antibody tests,^[45] that test for antibodies in a person's blood, can determine if the person was ever infected whereas the more common PCR tests only determine if the person is *currently* infected. The antibody tests became more available in 2021 and there is no mention of that kind of test on any HSA web page. These tests will be used to determine if a vaccination failed. A person, not vaccinated, can also determine if they are immune because of a previous asymptomatic illness they didn't know they had. There are millions of those people.

More Publicity and Visibility

The Grand Jury spent many hours doing searches for information to develop this report. More transparency on the part of Santa Cruz County would have been very helpful. For example, the PHD became a conduit to bring federal CARES money to the county to buy equipment and supplies. We found no publicity about this and believe that county residents would be happy to hear of some of their federal income taxes returning to the county. A significant example that lacks that kind of publicity is the establishment of the COVID-19 testing laboratory at UCSC^[85]^[35] where PHD directed over \$1.5M from the CARES funding.

Conclusion

We found that the Public Health officials in the county government are experienced professionals who met high expectations and, acting early and wisely, did mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic by promoting testing and tracing in Santa Cruz County. The county instituted a pandemic crisis management initiative called "Save Lives Santa Cruz County," much like a crisis center established during a wildfire to coordinate the effort of the wide range of agencies each independently doing their part to blunt the effects of the pandemic.

Findings

- F1.** The Health Services Agency of Santa Cruz County's web page listing COVID-19 testing sites does not adequately help residents find an appropriate testing site to fit their needs.
- F2.** The Health Services Agency of Santa Cruz County's Save Lives Santa Cruz County webpages do not adequately publicize and inform the public of the critical work that is being done, nor do they reflect the crisis the county has gone through.
- F3.** Establishing the COVID-19 testing laboratory at University of California at Santa Cruz is a great example of cooperation among the university and public agencies in the county. The laboratory has received considerable attention but the cooperative effort among the County Public Health Division, Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County and UCSC has not.

- F4.** The Santa Cruz County Public Health Division is staffed by well trained, skilled and knowledgeable professionals who applied that talent to help protect the residents of Santa Cruz County during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

- R1.** Within the next 3 months the Health Services Agency of Santa Cruz County should revise its web pages to help people find a testing site suitable to their requirements. Listing sites without characterizations is not sufficient. (F1)
- R2.** Within the next 3 months the Health Services Agency of Santa Cruz County should publicize the Save Lives Santa Cruz initiative beyond what is currently on their website. For example, they should publish the Save Lives weekly operational review for the public to see the behind the scenes work that is happening. (F2)
- R3.** Within the next 3 months the Health Services Agency of Santa Cruz County should prepare weekly highlights from the Save Lives periodic reports for public consumption. (F2, F4)
- R4.** Within the next 3 months the Health Services Agency of Santa Cruz County should provide a regularly scheduled and recorded video report available to the public on the county website. (F2, F4)
- R5.** Within the next 3 months the Health Service Agency of Santa Cruz County should create a press release detailing the support that was provided for the UCSC Laboratory. (F3)

Commendations

- C1.** The Public Health officials in Santa Cruz County reacted early and effectively to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The professionals were well prepared to respond quickly. (F4)
- C2.** The University of California at Santa Cruz Molecular Diagnostic Laboratory established a COVID-19 testing facility to make short turnaround testing available for the underserved in Santa Cruz County. (F3)
- C3.** The Santa Cruz Community Foundation and the Santa Cruz County Public Health Division teamed with the UCSC Molecular Diagnostic Laboratory to establish a commercial COVID-19 testing laboratory and provided funding and advice. (F3)

Required Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors	F1–F4	R1–R5	90 days/ August 31, 2021

Invited Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Director, Health Services Agency of Santa Cruz County	F1–F4	R1–R5	90 days/ August 31, 2021
Public Information Officer of Save Lives Santa Cruz	F1–F4	R1–R5	90 days/ August 31, 2021
Communication Manager of Santa Cruz County	F1–F4	R1–R5	90 days/ August 31, 2021

Definitions

- **CalCONNECT:** A California State website for collecting COVID-19 investigation and tracing information
- **CalREDIE:** California Reportable Disease Information Exchange
- **CARES:** Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (Act), enacted by the U.S. Congress
- **CCDL:** Colligan Clinical Diagnostic Laboratory at UCSC
- **CDC:** Center for Disease Control and Prevention (of the Public Health Service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- **CDPH:** California Department of Public Health
- **CLIA:** Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments
- **CMS:** Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- **COVID-19:** Name officially given to the disease causing the pandemic by the International Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organization
- **DNA:** Deoxyribonucleic Acid, a molecule that contains the genetic instructions for an organism
- **EUA:** Emergency Use Authorization, an authorization issued by the FDA to allow the use of medical equipment and processes in the U.S.
- **FDA: U.S.** Food and Drug Administration (of the Public Health Service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- **FEMA:** Federal Emergency Management Agency
- **GJ:** Grand Jury
- **HSA:** Health Services Agency (of Santa Cruz County)
- **ICD:** International Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organization

- **ICTV:** International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses
- **LHJ:** Local Health Jurisdiction, provides public health services throughout a defined geographic area
- **MDL:** Molecular Diagnostic Laboratory at UCSC, later renamed as the Colligan Clinical Diagnostic Laboratory
- **PAMF:** Palo Alto Medical Foundation, a subsidiary of Sutter Health
- **PCR:** Polymerase Chain Reaction, a kind of test used to detect the SARS-CoV-2 virus
- **PHD:** Public Health Division (of HSA)
- **RCF:** Residential Care Facility
- **RHF:** Residential Healthcare Facility
- **RNA:** Ribonucleic Acid, in some viruses RNA rather than DNA carries the genetic information
- **RT-PCR:** Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction, a kind of test used to detect the SARS-CoV-2 virus
- **SARS-CoV-2:** Name officially given to the virus that causes COVID-19 by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses
- **SNF:** Skilled Nursing Facility
- **UCSC:** University of California at Santa Cruz
- **WHO:** World Health Organization

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Websites

none

Site Visits

none

Appendix A – Kinds of SARS-CoV-2 Tests

Kinds of Tests

There are two recognized kinds of tests that pertain to the COVID-19 Pandemic the world has experienced in 2020-2021: **diagnostic tests** and **antibody tests**.

Diagnostic Tests

Diagnostic tests determine if a person currently has an infection that could be transmitted to others thus spreading the disease. Most commonly a person is infected for 10-14 days.

The two most prominent diagnostic tests that have been developed to detect the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes the COVID-19 disease in a person's body are 1) molecular tests, commonly called PCR tests, that detect the presence virus's genetic material and 2) antigen tests that detect special components of the actual virus.

Antibody Tests

Antibody tests look for your own body's virus fighting antibodies; having those antibodies present in your system indicates that you have previously encountered that virus and your body generated antibodies to fight it. The antibodies may last for long periods, months or years.

Diagnostic Testing

The tests most commonly available and discussed in the United States to date have been PCR diagnostic tests developed by commercial, educational and government organizations including UCSC and the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The usefulness of these tests depends upon several factors:

- How easy the test is to administer,
- How quickly the tests results are available,
- How effective the test is for not giving false negative results (indicating you are not infected when you are), and
- How effective it is for not giving false positive results (indicating that you are infected when you are not).

These diagnostic tests, when they work effectively, only detect if a person is currently infected and that period lasts in most people for 10-14 days. It is easily possible for a person to become infected immediately after getting a negative test. It is also possible for a person to be infected for a period much longer than 14 days.

There are two primary uses for diagnostic tests:

1. To distinguish those genuinely infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus from those not infected but perhaps showing similar symptoms. Those infected can be

effectively treated and kept from spreading the disease further. Those not infected with SARS-CoV-2 virus can be diagnosed and treated further knowing that they are not a risk for spreading the COVID-19 disease.

2. Detect asymptomatic infected people (a person infected but not showing any symptoms).

The FDA has granted over 230 Emergency Use Authorizations for these kinds of tests. Their quality varies widely.

Antibody Testing

A person who has become a COVID-19 “case” is known to have been infected by the virus and, once recovered, will not likely be a risk for infecting others. There is an unproven belief that a person cannot be infected more than once with the same strain of the virus. Antibody testing will reveal that a person had COVID-19 even though they had been asymptomatic.^[86]

The FDA has granted over 65 Emergency Use Authorizations for these kinds of tests.

Asymptomatic Infection

As the COVID-19 disease has spread and been studied more, it is believed that from 30% to 40% of those infected are asymptomatic. So, for example, if 10 cases of infection were detected in your community on one day, there may be another 3-4 cases that go undetected. These undetected, yet infected people, make controlling the spread of the virus extremely complex.

As of today, 358 tests and sample collection devices are authorized by the FDA under emergency use authorizations (EUAs). These included:

- 262 PCR molecular tests and sample collection devices,
- 75 antibody and other immune response tests, and
- 21 antigen tests.

For home sample collection:

- 45 molecular authorizations and
- one antibody authorization.

For home test results:

- one molecular *prescription* at-home test,
- 2 antigen *prescription* at-home tests,
- 4 over-the-counter at-home antigen tests, and
- 2 over-the-counter molecular tests.

The FDA has authorized tests for pooling/serial screening programs:

- 7 antigen tests and
- 2 molecular.^[87]

Appendix B – HSA Concept Paper

COVID-19 Surveillance, Monitoring and Mitigation: Key Public Health Infrastructure Needed to Shift from Emergency Response to Sustainable Containment

April 10, 2020 Draft Concept

Mimi Hall, Director, County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency

The current Public Health response to COVID-19 has lacked foundational public health infrastructure for early and effective response in keeping with proven public health approaches. As a result, containment and mitigation measures have necessarily focused on Shelter In Place and Social Distancing Strategies. However, essential public health actions are needed to mitigate future waves and sustain a long term reduction in new cases before a vaccine is widely available and more is known regarding immunity. These include:

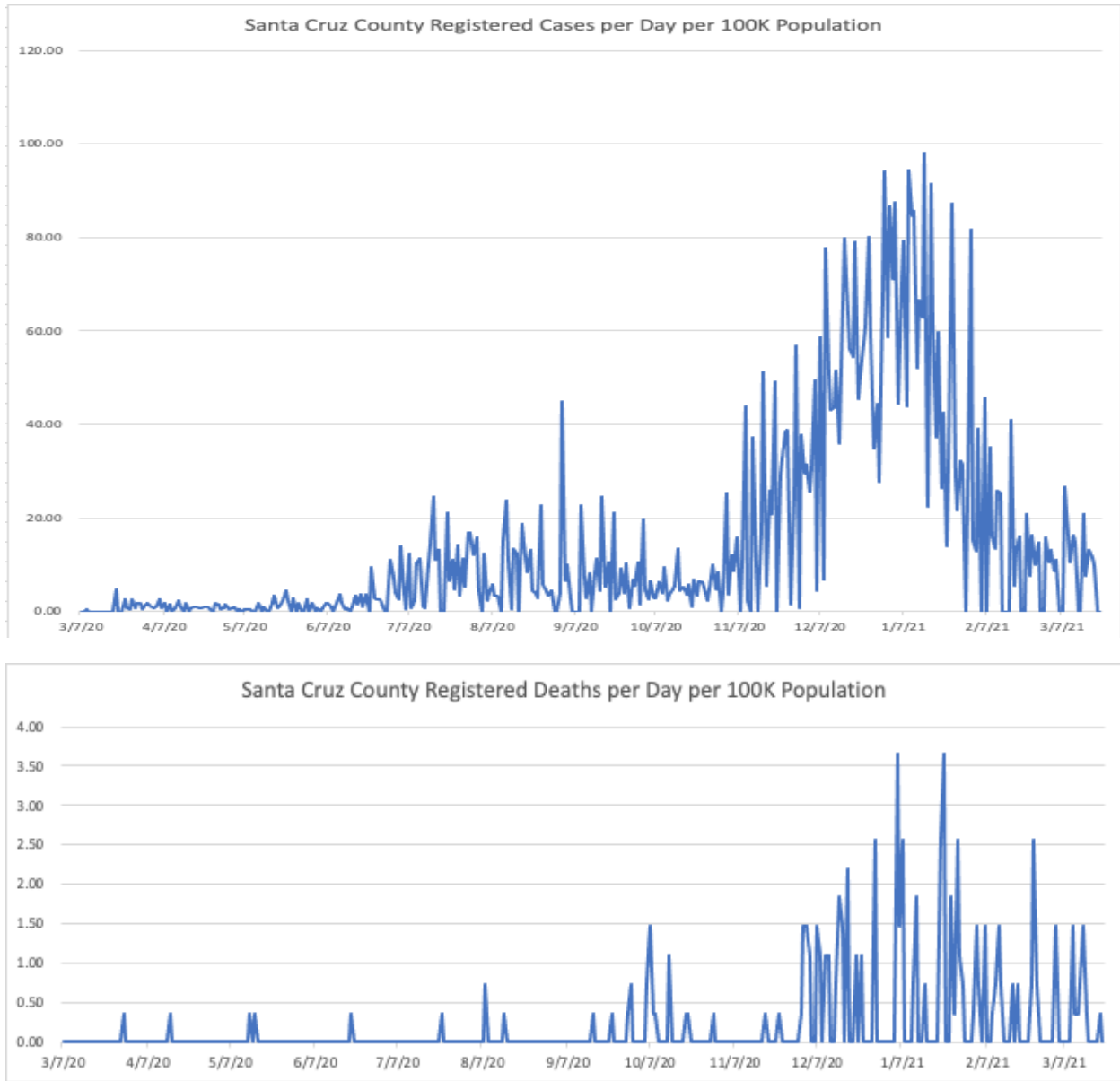
1. Widespread surveillance and monitoring
2. Rapid and responsive case investigation
3. Ability to quarantine known exposures and isolate positive cases
4. Nimble and accurate public communication

With this critical infrastructure in place, Santa Cruz County could ease social distancing guidelines, begin a return to social and economic normalcy, and quickly identify and control COVID-19 until a vaccine is available or widespread immunity is attained.

1. Widespread surveillance and monitoring
 - a. Testing – broad and accessible testing through all levels of the healthcare system
 - b. Agreements with sentinel surveillance sites and syndromic surveillance partners such as education, large employers and health care systems
 - c. Enhanced data sharing across health and non-health systems building out utility of the newly constructed data sharing platform and Santa Cruz Health Information Organization's countywide HIE
 - d. Increased epidemiological capacity at local health jurisdiction level
2. Rapid and responsive case investigation
 - a. Training of existing workforce in health system other disciplines trained in investigations to expand capacity for communicable disease investigations and contact tracing. Possible agreements with health officials for reporting
 - b. Shared reporting system and oversight of reporting and compliance
3. Ability to quarantine known exposures and isolate positive cases
 - a. Agreements with public and private partners to identify and assign locations and staffing for isolation and quarantine locations.
 - b. Expertise to set protocol and agreements across jurisdictions.
4. Nimble and extensive public campaign and system of public information and alerts to update the public of changing situations to alert and test those who may have been exposed beyond contact tracing (similar to systems we have in place for first responders).

Appendix C – Santa Cruz County COVID-19 Data

The charts below show the cases and deaths attributed to COVID-19 per 100,000 people in Santa Cruz County (SSC population number used: 273,213) for the year March 7, 2020 through March 7, 2021.



The first case of COVID-19 in Santa Cruz County was registered on March 6, 2020. The first death in Santa Cruz County attributed to the COVID-19 disease was on March 28, 2020. At that time the County had registered 39 total cases. The total number of deaths in the County didn't reach 10 until September 29, 2020.^[27]

Appendix D – Getting a COVID-19 Test Can Be Challenging

This is a walk-through example of getting a COVID-19 PCR test at the Ramsey Park site recommended on the HSA website^[82] for “non-sick” people.

Our Hypothetical Setup

Our hypothetical young woman has not had COVID-19 to her knowledge, has no symptoms, does have medical insurance and is planning to travel out of state on business. Getting a negative test would make her feel more responsible while travelling.

She uses Google to search for “covid testing in Santa Cruz” and gets directed to the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency “Get Tested” webpage. This page contains a listing of 18 sites where she could get tested in Santa Cruz County. The page starts with some information about pharmacies providing tests, a suggestion to call ahead and a link to a state testing search site. She continues to scroll through the site listing and comes to a notice at the very bottom of the page: “If I’m not sick, should I schedule an appointment for testing at the OptumServe community testing site in Watsonville?” Exactly what she was looking for.

Noticing that the word OptumServe (whatever that is) is a highlighted link, she clicks on it and is brought to a site “lhi.care/covidtesting”. There she is given the opportunity to select “California” as her area and is directed to this outline of how to proceed:

- Step 1. If eligible, register as a patient and create an account on this site.
- Step 2. After logging in, choose a testing location and schedule an appointment.
- Step 3. Attend your scheduled testing appointment.
- Step 4. On-location staff will check you in, conduct testing and send samples to the lab.
- Step 5. We'll inform you when your results are back from the lab and available on LHI.Care, typically within 4 to 6 days.

Registration is required, so she fills out a long list of health and personal questions that verge on intrusive and seem unnecessary, but are all marked as required; things like sexual orientation, race, and language spoken at home. Then it asks if you have health insurance. If she checks NO another checkbox pops up that displays: “By clicking this box you attest that you do not have any health insurance/coverage available.” So, best not to lie. If she checks YES she has to fill out all the pertinent information about her insurance including enough for the company to be billed.

Once she gets through that section she is asked to complete “registration” by completing all personal contact information including phone number or email address where the test results can be returned.

Finally, after about 25 minutes she enters a page where she can choose a location, a date and time interval to have her test.

If our young woman had clicked on the text of the HSA site recommending Ramsey park it would have expanded into 10 bullet points which include this one:

- Although you will be asked for insurance information and a valid identification at the time of check-in, neither is required to receive testing.

Whoever wrote that didn't ever try to register with LHI, since filling in all of the queries is necessary for being allowed to continue the registration.

We also point out the following which she may or may not have figured out:

1. The "Ramsey Park" site is one of about 80 sites distributed around California by the California Department of Public Health.
2. California had a contract with OptumServe, a large health care company, to manage all of these sites.
3. Ramsey Park is actually a Watsonville City park arranged to be used by HSA on behalf of the state.
4. OptumServe is part of Optum Group which is owned by the UnitedHealth Group.
5. LHI is yet another healthcare organization and is really Logistics Health Incorporated and is owned by Optum Group.

When our young woman goes to Ramsey Park she finds little in the way of signage for who actually is running the place. If she asks she will be told "OptumServe." One might think that the state and county might want to take some credit for establishing this service!

It is truly amazing how many steps, how many government agencies and how many companies are involved in our young woman getting tested for COVID-19. The HSA website could help. For example: is the LHI.care website legitimate? A person concerned about web security would be wise not to interact with this strangely named and unknown website (domain ".care"?). HSA could also soothe uneasiness by explaining that OptumServe has been contracted by the state to run this site.



Wildfire Threat to the City of Santa Cruz

Promote Policies to Prevent and Protect

Summary

After the largest fire in Santa Cruz County history, we enter the driest year in 40 years. As of May 27, 2021, there have been 51 vegetation fires in Santa Cruz county; and as of May 20, 2021, there have been 75 outdoor fires in the City of Santa Cruz. We can't control the weather and climate, but we can mitigate other risks.

This report looks at the risks of wildfire to the City of Santa Cruz and how it is managing those risks.



(Shmuel Thaler – Santa Cruz Sentinel)

Background

The City of Santa Cruz is the largest city in Santa Cruz County and the county seat. This scenic coastal city is bordered by the Monterey Bay to the south with wildlands surrounding much of the rest of the city.^[1]

A large portion of The City of Santa Cruz is considered to be in a Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) area. Of the 12.7 square miles of land in the city nearly 50% is designated WUI.^{[1] [2]} WUI is a zone of transition where structures and other human development meet with undeveloped wildland, and as a result, are at a higher risk for wildfires. Some of these areas are at an even higher risk due to limited road access and encampments. The majority of wildfires in the WUI are human-caused.^{[3] [4] [5] [6] [7]}

There are 5 areas designated as WUI or “likely” to have a fire in Santa Cruz; they are: Moore Creek, Arroyo Seco/Meder Canyon, Pogonip, Arana Gulch, and DeLaveaga. Residential development continues to spread into WUI areas of Santa Cruz increasing the danger to life and property should a fire occur.^[7]

Figure 1 shows the WUI interface between the developed portion of The City of Santa Cruz and undeveloped wildland (green line).

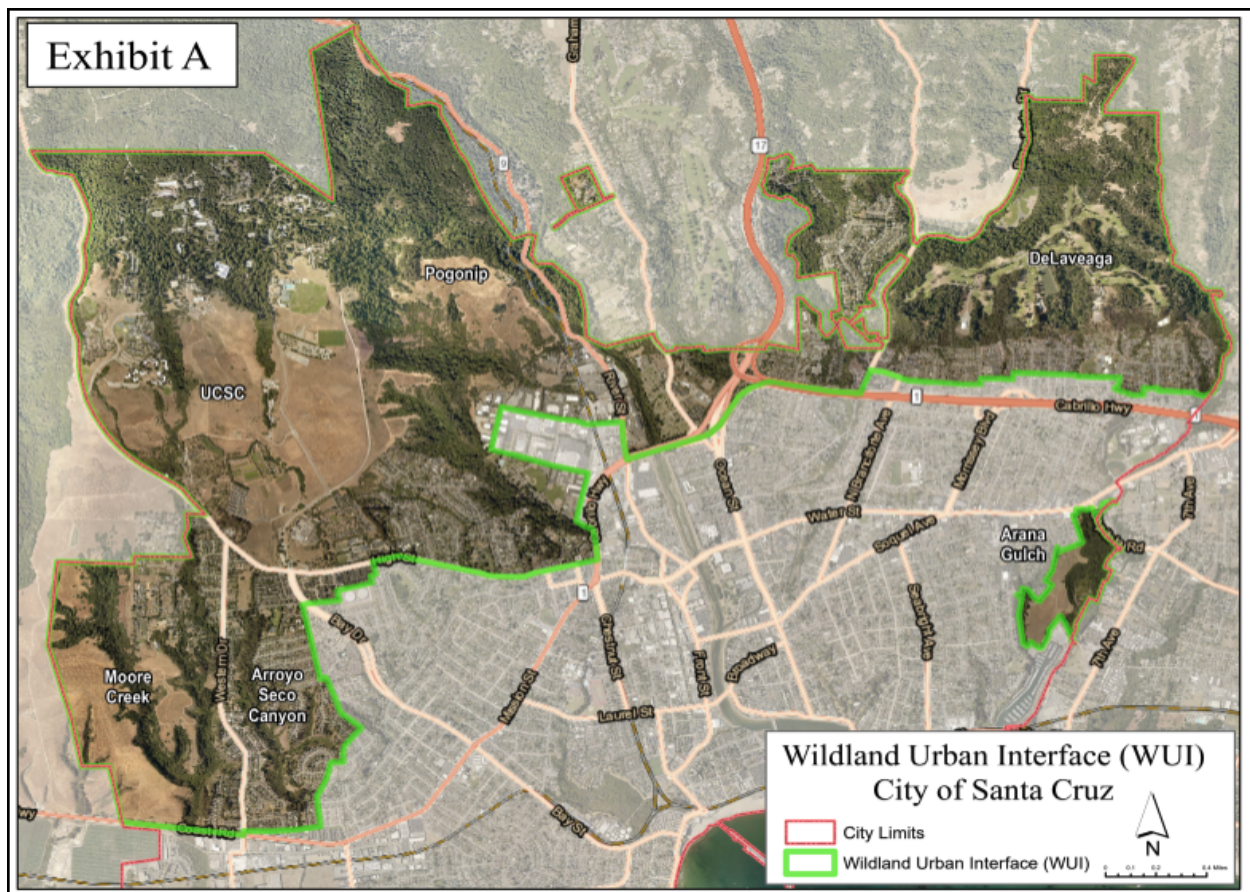


Figure 1. **Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) City of Santa Cruz**
(Source: Document received by Grand Jury)

The National Academy of Sciences 2018 study showed that in the U.S., California has the largest number of houses (4.5 million) in WUI areas, as well as the greatest number of people (11.2 million) living in the WUI.^{[5] [8] [9]} Five of the top 20 largest California wildfires occurred in 2020, according to California's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) list of wildfires.^[10] Table 1 from Cal Fire shows the number of wildfires and acres burned in California in 2019 and 2020. So far in 2021, the number of wildfires (717) compared to the same time period in 2020 continues the upward trend.

Table 1. Number of Wildfires and Acres Burned in California 2019 and 2020

Interval	Fires	Acres Burned
January 1, 2020 through December 29, 2020	8,112	1,443,152
January 1, 2019 through December 29, 2019	5,687	137,126
January 1, 2021 through March 28, 2021	717	1,541
January 1, 2020 through March 28, 2020	608	873

Source: Cal Fire Statistics^[10]

The CZU lightning complex fire which started on August 16, 2020, burned 63,754 acres in Santa Cruz County and destroyed 1,431 structures. The CZU fire was stopped before it reached the City of Santa Cruz.^{[11] [12]} The city may have escaped the CZU fire, but the city's extensive wildlands have had more than their share of wildfires. In 2020 there were 88 wildland fires in the City of Santa Cruz compared to 58 wildland fires in 2019.^[13]

The threat of wildfires is real and is a growing concern to many residents. The public has expressed alarm over groves of eucalyptus trees found throughout the City of Santa Cruz including the WUI. Eucalyptus are highly flammable trees, and desire for their removal has been expressed on the website Nextdoor, in letters to the editor in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, and in complaints to the Santa Cruz County Grand Jury.^{[14] [15]}

Also there have been letters to the editor in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* about fires caused in homeless encampments which have been, or can be, located in known WUI areas.^[16]^{[17] [18]} According to the Local Hazard Mitigation Plan there is a high probability that a wildfire will occur in one or more WUI areas in Santa Cruz. It is believed to be just a matter of time.^[7]

These factors and events give rise to three critical questions:

- What is the City of Santa Cruz doing to deal with the risk of wildfires in the city's many WUI areas?
- What is it doing well?
- What can it do better?

Scope and Methodology

This investigation focuses on:

- the wildfire threat to the City of Santa Cruz from vegetation and homeless encampments
- and what the City of Santa Cruz is doing to mitigate these wildfire risks.

The methods of investigation employed included: independent research, interviews with city leaders and agency staff, document requests, and data analysis.

The 2019-20 Grand Jury prepared a thorough review and analysis of the preparedness of Santa Cruz County to deal with fire and how to mitigate those risks. This investigation will build on that report and follow up on the specific issues in the City of Santa Cruz.^[19]

Another 2019-20 Grand Jury report dealt with homelessness in the county.^[20] Our investigation and report is limited to the fire risk in the City of Santa Cruz. This report is not an investigation into the problem of homelessness but how homelessness encampments increase the risk of wildfires in WUI areas of the city.

Investigation

The Danger of Wildfire to Santa Cruz

After 2020, the residents of Santa Cruz are all much more familiar with the risk of wildfire. While the city avoided the CZU Lightning Complex, the fire got very close to the borders of the city and the University of California, Santa Cruz, was evacuated. Wildfire risk is ever present, but there are ways to manage those risks.

Santa Cruz is blessed with acres of open space and recreation areas that ring the city as our greenbelt. Those areas are also laden with fuels in the form of trees, shrubs, and grasses. Wildland fires need two things: fuel and ignition. Weather and climate can increase the likelihood of a wildland fire spreading.

Weather and Climate

Fire risk is impacted by weather and climate. We have seasonal fire weather in California that results from a number of factors that increase the ignition, intensity, and spread of wildfires. Most well known of these factors would be off-shore winds which blow dry and warm air from the inland areas out to sea. This has multiple negative effects. Off-shore winds block our nightly marine layer, or cold wet blanket, from moving inland and reducing temperatures and increasing humidity. They are also warmer and drier, which dries out vegetation making it more likely to burn and with greater intensity. Corresponding high winds intensify wildfires and vastly increase their spread by both spreading embers over greater distance and impeding firefighting efforts.

Cal Fire has historically defined fire season as running from May to November, but climate change is having an impact. One result is that the fire season is starting earlier, sometimes in the spring. Winter rains are starting later in the year, and often with less

frequency and lower annual precipitation. We are also experiencing the driest year in 40 years.^{[21] [22]} We have had 51 vegetation fires as of May 27th in Santa Cruz County.^{[2] [10]}

We can't control the weather and climate, but we can mitigate other risks.

Fuel

Vegetation management is an important way that we keep our open spaces wild while reducing the threat of wildfires. By removing ladder fuels such as low limbs and shrubs, the Santa Cruz City Fire Department has reduced the likelihood of a fire spreading rapidly or growing out of control. By removing these ladder fuels, what starts as a grass fire remains a grass fire until firefighters arrive to control it. Without this step, the same fire could grow into an engulfing crown fire by moving up low shrubs and branches into the trees. Vegetation management also includes building fire breaks by removing all vegetation down to bare mineral earth which limits a fire's expansion.^[7]

Public versus Private Land

Starting in the summer of 2018, the Fire Department worked with the Parks and Recreation Department to identify areas where vegetation management was needed in city owned properties that posed a threat to neighborhoods within WUI areas. Shaded fuel breaks were constructed in DeLaveaga Park along with vegetation removal by California Conservation Corps and Cal Fire.^[23] The city hired contractors to manage vegetation in Arroyo Seco and Pogonip in early 2020. However, this is a job like painting the Golden Gate Bridge: as soon as you're finished, you need to start again.

Private property owners in the WUI bear primary responsibility for vegetation management on their property. The Fire Department fosters the creation of Firewise Groups to educate about proactive vegetation management.^[24] There are two Firewise Groups in Santa Cruz, one in Highland/Hillcrest Terrace in the Pogonip WUI area and the other in Prospect Heights in the DeLaveaga WUI area.^{[3] [25]}

Homeowners in WUI areas are required to follow the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The purpose of the CWPP is to identify and prioritize areas for fuel reduction and includes stricter building codes to decrease the risk of wildfire to the home.^{[3] [26]}

In December 2020, the City of Santa Cruz adopted and incorporated California State fire codes into the Santa Cruz Municipal Code to help decrease fire damage to homes in WUI areas. Building codes require vegetation management around the home and describe construction requirements for new homes having to use fire resistant materials.^{[3] [27]}

Types of Fuels

There are differences in vegetation types. Some trees and shrubs contain more oils or pitch making them more flammable or fuel laden.^[28] One type of vegetation, eucalyptus, warrants special mention.

Eucalyptus trees are considered a fire hazard because they shed bark and dead leaves in large amounts, which become tinder for fires. They also contain greater quantities of volatile oils in all their parts, which when heated, easily ignite and burn with explosive intensity. Some organizations recommend wholesale removal and replacement of them.^[29] The Sierra Club did so regarding the Blue Gum Eucalyptus in the Berkeley area.^[30]

The Fire Department has opted for managing the ladder fuels around the city's eucalyptus groves rather than outright removal or replacement. Although eucalyptus trees are highly flammable and present a risk of falling due to a shallow root system, they could be no more of a fire risk than other species when properly managed by appropriate measures including removing dead ground cover and maintaining open space under the canopy.^[31] ^[32]

Ignition

For the CZU complex fire, the source of ignition was hundreds of dry lightning strikes. While those can't be prevented, other sources of ignition can be. Human actions or inactions that increase the risk of wildfire can be identified and mitigated. Tall grass can be removed from around parking areas where a hot exhaust system could start a fire. Outdoor grills in parks can be closed from use during fire season.

The biggest risk as identified by the city in the Local Hazard Mitigation Plan is illegal camping.

Although Santa Cruz has over 3,000 acres of greenbelt and parkland, the City does not have the resources to adequately police and protect this area. This inadequate policing increases the frequency of illegal camping (Santa Cruz has a substantial chronic homeless population), which can result in fires in limited access and canyon areas.^[7]

Threat of Wildfire from Encampments

There are a number of fire risks from unmanaged encampments. Unhoused individuals and groups will use fires for warming or cooking. Propane canisters and other fuel sources pose a risk of ignition and explosion in a fire, putting our first responders at a greater risk. Closely packed encampments are full of flammable plastic and other synthetic materials such as tents, tarps, sleeping bags, and clothing, as well as portable grills, charcoal, butane tanks, and flammable liquids. See the photo on page 1 with melted tarps and propane tanks.^[33]

Encampments in the WUI areas increase wildfire risk. There are approximately 865 individuals in the City of Santa Cruz who are unsheltered.^[34] In October 2017 campers started a wildfire in the Moore Creek Preserve at the bottom of the canyon. It was put out within hours by ground crews and air support. Fortunately the fire was controlled before it spread to a nearby stand of eucalyptus trees that surround the 168 unit The Hilltop Apartment complex on Western Drive.^[35]

The Santa Cruz Fire Department initiated the development of an internal tool to document fire risks in the WUI. They used the city's Information Technology (IT) staff to create a cell phone app to take photos of fire incidents in outside locations and the ignition sources. The information is then mapped to help determine areas of concern. From the following maps there were 19 fewer fire incidents in Pogonip in 2020 than in 2019 (16 in 2020 and 35 in 2019). This is due to the clearing of encampments in the area.^[36]

Figures 2 - 4 were provided to the Grand Jury and show the number and location of outdoor fire incidents by year.^{[36] [37]}

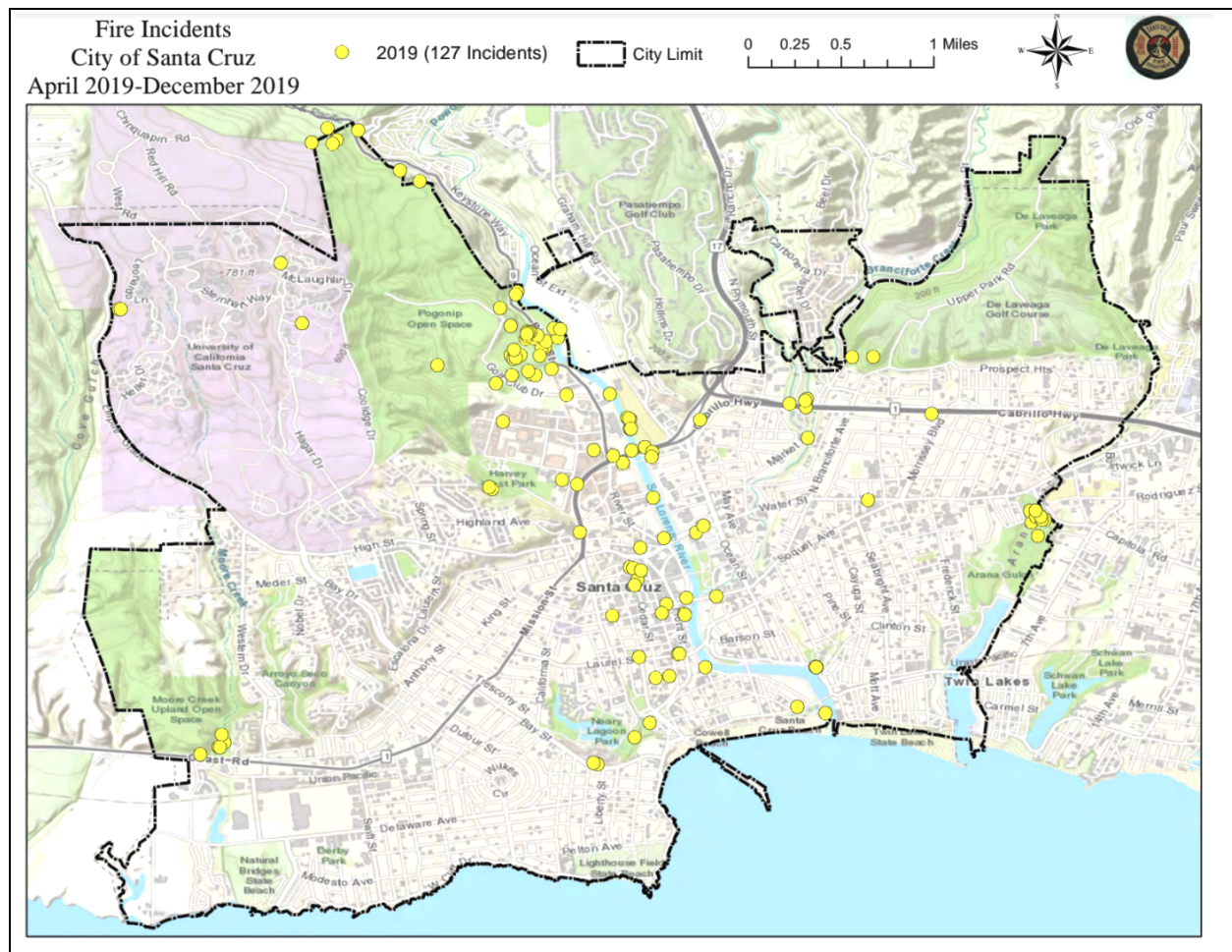


Figure 2. **Fire Incidents City of Santa Cruz April 2019 - December 2019**
 (Source: Document received by Grand Jury)

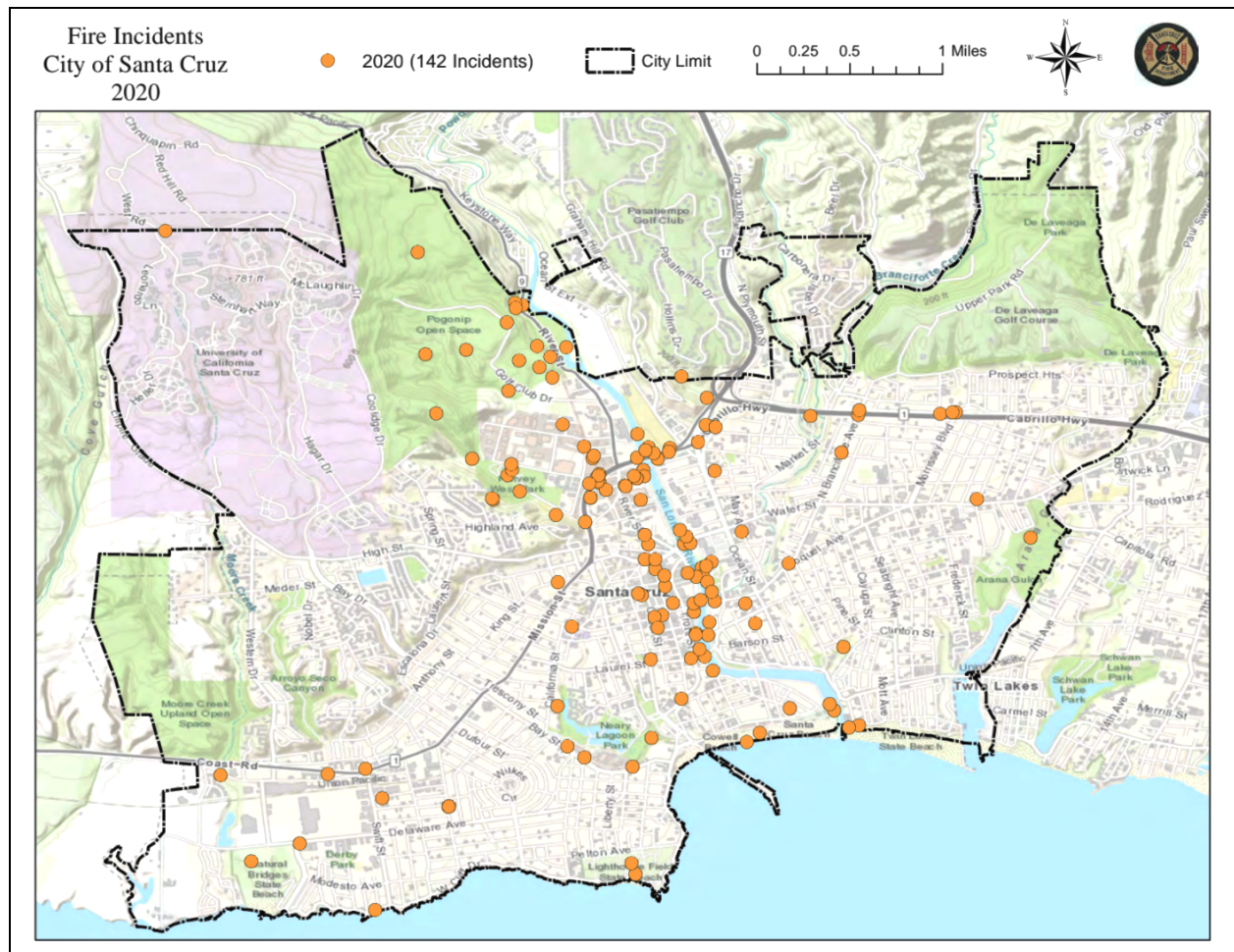


Figure 3. Fire Incidents City of Santa Cruz 2020
(Source: Document received by Grand Jury)

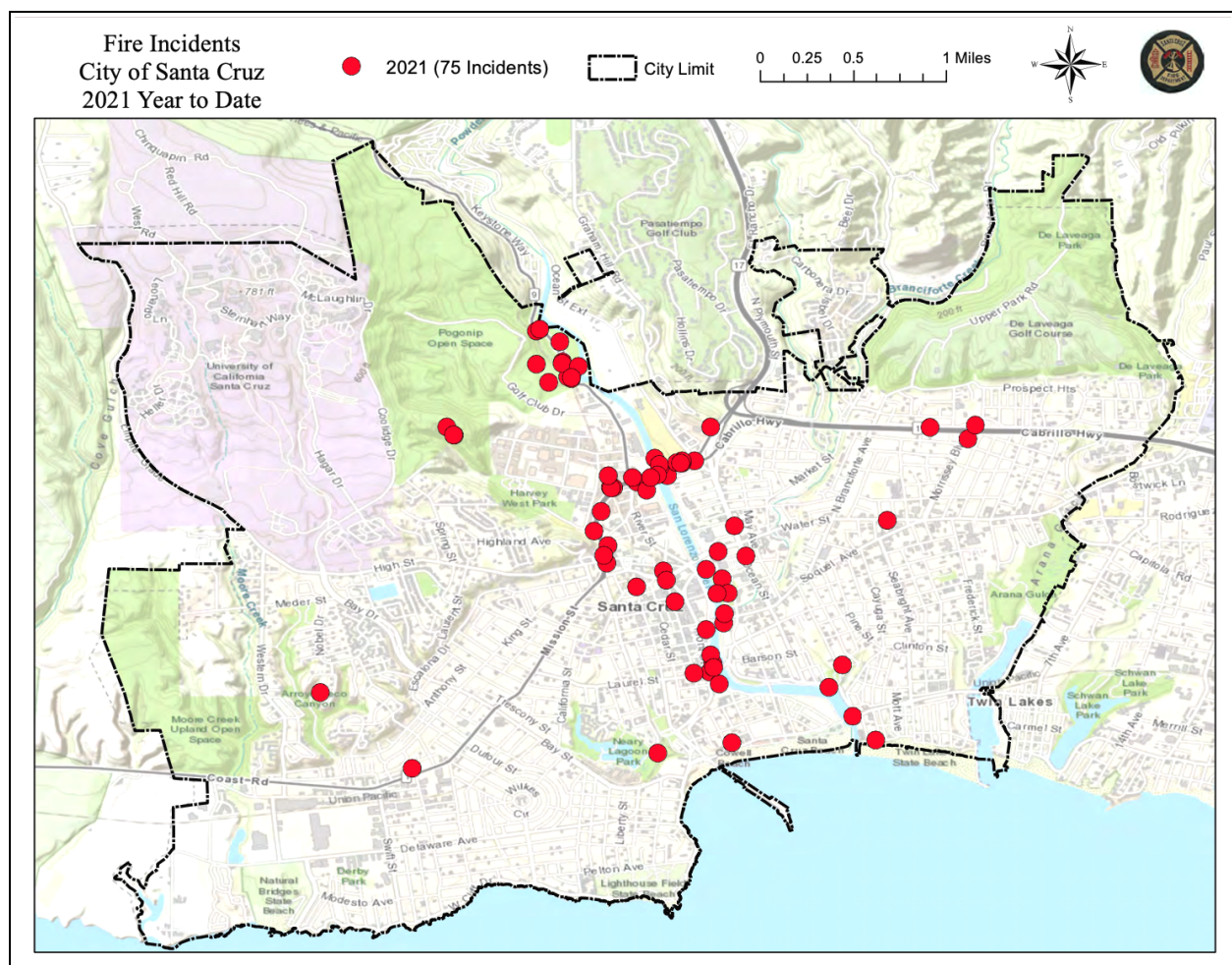


Figure 4. Fire Incidents City of Santa Cruz 2021 Year to Date on May 20, 2021
(Source: Document received by Grand Jury)

Barriers to Mitigation

City as Epicenter

The greatest percentage of the county's unhoused people are located in the City of Santa Cruz. Approximately 55% of the county's unhoused population are located in the city, while the city's population is but 24% of the county.^[34]

A number of factors contribute to this. Seventy-three percent of county shelter beds are in the city. The main jail and the Santa Cruz Health Center are located in the city, as well as other governmental and private facilities that provide services to the homeless population^[38].

The city bears the social and financial impact of homeless encampments since the majority of unhoused campers are located in the city but the city doesn't control the resources to manage them. Most of the state and federal funds for homeless shelters, services, and the like are administered by the county. As noted in last year's Grand Jury

report “Homelessness: Big Problem, Little Progress,” the lack of coordination between key stakeholders is a significant barrier to the efficient and capable implementation of homelessness solutions.^[39] There is a regular meeting between the city and county including the mayor, vice mayor, District 3 supervisor, and District 5 supervisor (2x2 Committee); but those meeting records are not public.

Legal Obstacles

The City of Santa Cruz is faced with significant legal impediments that impact its ability to remove encampments. *City of Boise v. Martin*, decided in 2019, made ordinances prohibiting certain activities including camping on public lands unenforceable. The Boise case held that city ordinances that impose criminal penalties on unhoused people for sleeping or sitting on public property violates the 8th Amendment which prohibits “cruel or unusual punishment.” As such, conduct that is an unavoidable consequence of one’s being human should not be criminalized. The recent preliminary injunction in *Santa Cruz Homeless Union, et al. v. Bernal, et al*, prevented the city from clearing the encampment in San Lorenzo Park that had been identified as a risk to public health.^[40]

Any attempt to close an encampment is likely to give rise to a lawsuit in federal court initiated by non-governmental organizations (NGO). The city may prevail, but it will be required to defend.

California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) right-of-ways

Within the city limits, property adjacent to state highways is state owned and controlled. This means that the city does not have jurisdiction over the management of the people living on the side of highways or what happens in those areas. The city cannot move highway encampments. This is the responsibility of Caltrans with the help of the California Highway Patrol.^[41]

Despite this, the city is obligated to provide emergency services (fire, medical) to these areas and has chosen to provide trash management. Highway adjacent encampments are the state’s responsibility even if it is the city’s problem.

This has been the subject of recent news items as the city and county wrote to the Governor for help with the encampment at Highway 1 and River Street. As of the writing of this report, the Governor has not responded to their appeal but Caltrans has been cooperative and has the authority to ultimately make any decisions to remove the encampment.^{[38] [42]} This camp was cleared on May 10, 2021 in a coordinated effort involving Santa Cruz Police Department, California Highway Patrol, and Caltrans.^[43]

COVID-19 and Budget

COVID-19 has had multiple impacts on the city. It drastically reduced city revenues. It has increased state regulation on city operations that has limited options. State mandates beginning in March 2020 forced most of the city’s tax generating businesses to close or be severely restricted.

The County Health Department also decided that closing encampments heightens risks of infection to both campers and the population at large. From interviews for this investigation last fall, we learned that the global pandemic also required city departments to continue serving the public while developing new protocols to keep employees and citizens safe.^[38]

Since the pandemic began the City's revenues from sales and business related taxes fell precipitously such that the city's departments have been forced to take general budget cuts of about 10% across the board, as learned in interviews.^[38] Yet this has happened when greater numbers of homeless encampments and increased fire risks have put greater demands on the city's resources.

It should be noted that over the last year, the city has reactively spent significant resources on clearing and cleaning up encampments.^[38] Proactive policies that would stop encampments from becoming entrenched could help reduce these costs.

NIMBY and the Need for Public Engagement

Another obstacle the City of Santa Cruz faces is politically active and engaged citizens who do not want homeless people in their neighborhoods. These active "NIMBY" (Not In My Backyard) neighborhoods have made it increasingly challenging for the city to initiate proactive policies that would remove entrenched encampments.^[44]

As recent events regarding the Temporary Outdoor Living Ordinance (TOLO) have shown, the city is aware of the need to do better in their outreach and messaging around new ordinances.^[45]

City Management of Wildfire Risks

The City of Santa Cruz has a solid understanding of the risks of wildfires in the WUI. The Fire Department's Division of Fire Prevention is tasked with identifying and mitigating fire risks and the City's Risk Management Plan defines these risks. The challenge has been in the city's ability to manage and mitigate these known risks.

Vegetation

During this investigation we found that the Fire Department has numerous programs to address the risk of wildfire from vegetation on public and private land. They have a plan to maintain fuel level in public spaces. They also manage Firewise groups to educate homeowners in the WUI on how to manage their own vegetation and fuel load. They are working to expand these groups to more areas of the city.

The Team

In 2019 the City of Santa Cruz established an Encampment Assessment Team (EAT) which monitors and develops operational plans and strategies for managing homeless encampments. It includes representatives from the City Manager's Office, the Fire Department, Police, Parks and Recreation, Public Works, Water Department and the city attorney's office. The EAT meets weekly, but because an attorney from the city

attorney's office attends these meetings, all records of what is discussed have been claimed to be undisclosable under attorney-client privilege. As a result it has not been possible to assess the effectiveness of this team.^[46]

Further, it is unclear what authority, if any, has been delegated to the EAT. With transparency, this team and its work has the potential to serve the public by informing about the wildfire risks and how they are managed.

The city does not have a fixed policy in place that designates what person or persons within the city government has final authority to manage and mitigate the fire risks associated with homeless encampments except for emergency situations where the Fire Department has the authority.

The Encampments

The city council recently adopted, then rescinded, a new Temporary Outdoor Living Ordinance (TOLO) which stayed within the bounds of the Boise case and mitigated the risks of entrenched camping in the city.^[45] This was a significant step in managing this complex and ever changing situation that could have given the city the tools to eliminate dangerous camping in the WUI.

TOLO, in its now rejected form, contained several provisions that would lessen the risk of wildfire in the City of Santa Cruz including:^[22]

- Prohibition of overnight and daytime encampments in sensitive and at risk areas of the city to reduce the risk of a wildfire caused by accidental ignition.
- Designation of Arroyo Seco Canyon as a sensitive species area and a WUI area.
- Prohibition of encampments in open spaces at all times.
- Requirement that tents used by those camping in other areas be packed up every morning to limit entrenchment.
- Requirement for frequent counts of the number and the location of those sleeping outside to define the situation and its seasonal changes and associated risks.
- Requirement for continued work with the county and better advocacy for the city.

Local city departments are taking proactive measures to gather relevant current data necessary for planning. The Fire Department conducts frequent walk-throughs of encampments to assess risk levels. The Police Department has recently undertaken a more in depth count of the unhoused population within the City of Santa Cruz to get more accurate and timely data to help address the current situation.^[38] It is hoped that it will continue to do so on a regular basis.

Recent *Sentinel* headlines are a case study in how dangerous encampments can be to those living in them and the city as a whole. There have been three major fires in the Highway 1 camp this year resulting in injuries and destruction of property at the time of this writing.^{[47] [48] [49]} Living outside is dangerous. We could easily have a “Ghost Ship” event in Santa Cruz, like the disaster in Oakland where 36 people died in a warehouse fire. It could happen here with a fire spreading through densely packed tents and tarps.

The TOLO presented a first step in mitigating the risks from these entrenched encampments. Enforced as described, it would have greatly diminished the danger of wildfire. Tent and tarp cities can't build and sprawl when they have to move every day.

Conclusion

Changing climate trends have increased fire risks in the City's WUI areas. Together with an increase in the number of encampments, this has placed a higher demand on the City's resources. This is happening during a time that the City's budget is shrinking due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is consensus across the City departments that homeless encampments present a significant risk of wildfires, as well as a risk to public health and safety. After a tremendous expenditure of human capital and opportunity cost, the City has more recently taken steps to organize around this problem and address it proactively. We find it important that they continue this work in a transparent manner.

Findings

- F1.** Despite recognizing that the most important factor to reduce fire risk in the WUI area is the removal of entrenched encampments, the City has only done this in reaction to extreme emergency situations, instead of on a proactive basis.
- F2.** The Temporary Outdoor Living Ordinance was a significant step toward proactive management and mitigating the risks associated with entrenched encampments.
- F3.** The coordination between the City and the County on homeless issues is insufficient and not transparent to the public.
- F4.** Accurate data, including a count of the unhoused living in Santa Cruz, is necessary to assess and manage the fire risks from encampments.
- F5.** Based on the amount of debate and public concern about fire safety of eucalyptus, the Fire Department has done insufficient outreach on this topic.
- F6.** There are still WUI neighborhoods without a Firewise group. Firewise groups decrease the risk of fire in WUI areas through public education about protecting property and vegetation management.
- F7.** The City of Santa Cruz doesn't do enough to show that they are limited in what they can do to remove encampments along highways as this property is owned by Caltrans and under state law.
- F8.** The 10% across the board budget cuts do not match priorities of the City.
- F9.** The holding in *Martin v. City of Boise* limited the City's ability to enforce existing ordinances. TOLO was a carefully crafted attempt to manage fire risks from entrenched encampments.

Recommendations

- R1.** Before the height of fire season, the City Council should agendize and recognize the fire risk from encampments and craft an ordinance to address these issues. (F1, F2)
- R2.** In the next three months, the City Council needs to have more transparent and formal coordination with the county on management of homeless resources. (F3)
- R3.** In the next 12 months, the Santa Cruz Fire Department should educate the public on risk of fires caused by eucalyptus versus other vegetation. This would help all communities with eucalyptus trees realize the importance of vegetation management and not just in Firewise neighborhoods. (F5)
- R4.** In the next 12 months, the Santa Cruz Fire Department should work to establish a Firewise community in every WUI area of the City. (F6)
- R5.** The City Council should continue efforts to revise ordinances to comply with recent case law so they will allow more effective management of encampments to reduce fire risks. (F9)
- R6.** In the next three months, the City Manager should establish a procedure for conducting regular quarterly surveys of the number and location of the City's unhoused population to more effectively manage fire risks in WUI areas. (F4)
- R7.** Before the budget cycle, the City Manager should revisit budget priorities. (F8)
- R8.** In the next six months, the City Council should produce a detailed plan and accounting of how the federal and state homeless funds are used. (F3)
- R9.** In the next three months, the City Manager should notify the public that Caltrans is responsible for the removal of all encampments along state highways. (F7)
- R10.** Continually, the City Council should engage state offices to be more involved in encampment situations. This should be with all homeless encampments on Caltrans property and not just for highway widening projects. (F7)

Commendations

- C1.** The Fire Department has worked creatively with City IT staff to use technology to better manage risks.
- C2.** The Police Department conducted a count of the unhoused population of Santa Cruz, providing the first detailed, city-led reporting on the situation.

Required Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Santa Cruz City Council	F1–F3, F5, F9	R1, R2, R4, R5, R8, R10	90 Days August 31, 2021

Invited Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Santa Cruz City Fire Chief	F5, F6	R3, R4	90 Days August 31, 2021
Santa Cruz City Manager	F4, F7, F8	R6, R7, R9	90 Days August 31, 2021

Definitions

Homeless encampment: Homeless encampments are locations where one or more homeless people live in an unsheltered area. These encampments can be found on properties owned by private individuals or companies or owned by local, state, and federal governmental agencies.^[50]

WUI - wildland urban interface: The line, area, or zone where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels.^[51]

Wildlands: The generally open and continuous areas of vegetation (forest, brush meadow, etc.) that do not have human development or travel routes within them (as defined by Santa Cruz City Fire Department).^[52]

Open space: Open space has human made roads or trails that allow for access. Generally these would be for pedestrian or limited vehicle access. Often these abut or overlap wildlands as they share more or less human created features (as defined by the Santa Cruz City Fire Department).^[52]

Green belt: Green belts are pockets of a wildland or open space area that is surrounded by human development. The difference being that they are not continuous with an open space that is without significant human development around it. They could be considered islands of space that are surrounded by roads, houses, etc (as defined by Santa Cruz City Fire Department).^[52]

Fuel Ladder: A fuel ladder or ladder fuel is a firefighting term for live or dead vegetation that allows a fire to climb up from the landscape or forest floor into the tree canopy. Should fire become involved in the crown or tree canopy, embers may be expected to travel up to 1.5 miles or further depending on how strong the wind is and potentially can cause additional fires.^[7] Common ladder fuels include tall grasses, shrubs, and tree branches, both living and dead. The removal of fuel ladders is part of defensible space “firescaping” practices.^[53]

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Site Visits

None



Distance Learning During the Pandemic in the Pajaro Valley Unified School District

Successes, Pitfalls, and Plans for the Future

Summary

In March of 2020, schools began closing across California as the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic hit home. The Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD), the largest in Santa Cruz County serving over 20,000 students, made plans to close for two weeks. PVUSD moved quickly, creating and putting plans in place that provided for distance learning and a way to communicate with students, teachers, and families. As it turned out, students were out of school for approximately one year.

PVUSD is to be applauded for its agile and broad response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within five days the district furnished the students with computers and internet access. Teachers and students received training in distance learning. Social services were provided to families. Students, parents, and teachers have been surveyed numerous times, providing information on what worked and what did not.

PVUSD should analyze and apply these findings, and continue with evaluations when schools reopen. The findings should be documented and shared so that distance learning can be further improved in the upcoming school year and beyond to help students succeed. In our unpredictable world, distance learning is here to stay.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced students everywhere to employ new ways of learning when their schools closed down. The focus of this investigation is on PVUSD because it serves nearly half of all students in the county, contains the greatest percentage of low-income and Latinx families (see Figure 1), and is in the area with the highest COVID-19 case rate in the county.^[1]

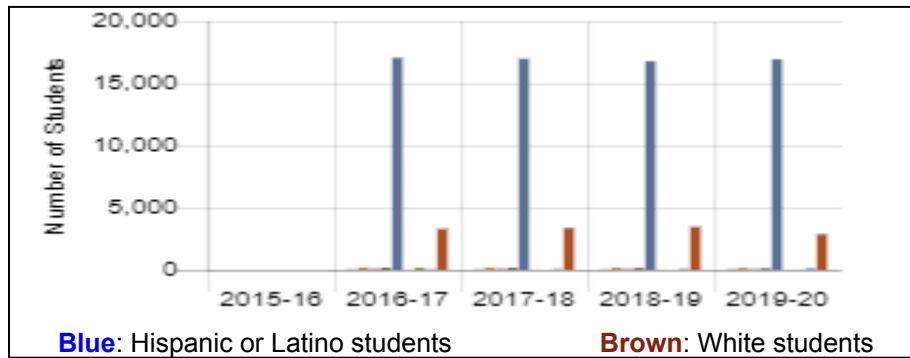


Figure 1. **PVUSD Cumulative Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity**^[2]

Within five days of the schools' shutdown and the implementation of distance learning, PVUSD updated its webpage with information for the community and equipped all students with Chromebook computers and school supply bags to help prepare them for remote learning. Students without internet connection at home had **Safe Spaces** provided. These spaces gave students secure and safe places to do their schoolwork and also served as a location for resources, with school staff working to meet individual student needs for food, clothing, and counseling support. Additionally, 500 *hotspots*, some in school busses, were made available throughout the district to ensure that all students had access to internet connections.^{[3] [4]} Community programs provided families in need with meals, clothing, rental assistance, and counseling. Agencies collaborated to take care of their community by removing obstacles and finding innovative solutions. Funding through the CARES Act helped to improve and upgrade some of the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems in the district's schools.^{[3] [5] [6]}

It should be noted that planning for school closures had been ongoing for months, beginning as early as January 2020. Superintendent Michelle Rodriguez sent the first communication to the educational community about COVID-19 on January 24, 2020.^[7]

The effect of the pandemic has been more severe for students living in poverty, are of color, LGBTQ, or have learning and/or social-emotional problems. Teachers, too, have struggled, having to quickly learn new approaches to teach and communicate with students and families, often while parenting their own children in the home.

The Grand Jury wanted to find out how distance learning has worked for all concerned. It will be important for PVUSD to process the lessons learned so that distance learning can be utilized in the best possible way in the future.

On March 14, 2020, there were seven cases of COVID-19 in Santa Cruz County. One of them was an employee at Rio Del Mar Elementary School, part of PVUSD. That same day, the PVUSD Board of Trustees held an emergency meeting to unanimously approve a plan to close all district schools for two weeks, and allow most employees to work from home.^[8]

As part of this mandate, PVUSD technology employees were tasked with disinfecting some 15,000 Chromebooks for students to use at home. The district, along with local company Cruzio and Equal Access Santa Cruz County, provided internet access to the district's students, some of whom lived in remote areas of the county.^{[9] [10] [11]}

Schools across the state were planning to close for one to two weeks. However, PVUSD Superintendent Michelle Rodriguez said at the time, "This is not going to go away in a few weeks, so we need to have continuity of learning."^[8]

Scope and Methodology

The Grand Jury conducted interviews of administrators, teachers, students, and parents. We listened to webinars featuring these groups. We requested and examined documents and monitored newspapers, Facebook postings, and internet sources for updates on local school issues.

Investigation

The PVUSD, with over 20,000 students, is a large school district managing:

- 16 elementary schools,
- 6 middle schools,
- 3 high schools,
- 8 charter and alternative schools, and
- 1 adult education school.

On January 28, 2020 the PVUSD Superintendent sent out a note to staff and families informing the district about the potential of a COVID-19 pandemic, what individuals could do, and what actions PVUSD and the County Public Health Division was taking.^[12] This was one of the earliest efforts to keep the community informed about COVID-19. Dr. Rodriguez's FAQs, which provided updated information on COVID-19 testing, vaccinations, safety protocols, internet access, and school closures, continued consistently throughout these early days and beyond.^[13] On March 14, 2020, when the schools were ordered to stop in-person learning, it was not a complete surprise to the PVUSD administration, faculty, students and parents.

Within five days of the schools' shutdown and the implementation of distance learning, PVUSD equipped the district's students with Chromebook computers and school supply bags to help prepare them for remote learning. However, despite the tremendous success in providing the majority of students internet access, approximately 400 students don't effectively participate. These students live in rural areas of the county. Some did not pick up their Chromebook or have reliable internet access, and some the district was unable to locate.

The social-emotional issues that students experienced during the pandemic have been worrisome for administrators, teachers, and parents.^[14] Some students hesitate or avoid turning their computer cameras on because of privacy issues; they don't want others to see how they live. Some are lonely, tired, depressed, or are being abused. Some have no one at home who can help with schoolwork and computer issues. Some have experienced serious illness and deaths in their families. Some are in desperate need of food, clothing, and housing. Others need to care for younger siblings while parents work, or need to work themselves to help out financially. Teachers have been trained to look for signs of distress, and reach out to students and families via the internet, mail, and phone. Home visits and support from PVUSD Student Services, Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance,^[15] and other social service agencies have increased. More funding and support for qualified outreach staff will be needed to effectively continue these services.

Some students, however, have thrived with distance learning. They say they have more time to focus on schoolwork, and have fewer distractions and social pressures. Some like the ease with which they can communicate with teachers. Remote learning can be a complement to in-person learning, allowing students to explore additional areas of interest. It can also be used to help students needing extra help academically. Governor Newsom has said it will definitely be a part of California's educational system, even when schools reopen, and that money is available to help with funding.^[16]^[17] The pandemic offers an opportunity to think "out of the box."

"What we're hearing very broadly from schools all across the state is that they do want to have some level of flexibility to continue to provide distance learning for some families," said Kevin Gordon, president of Capitol Advisors, a lobbying firm representing hundreds of California school districts.^[18]

The role of parents has also changed during the pandemic. They are more involved now than ever before. Virtual communication has made it easier to participate. The Superintendent's office is concerned with the emotional needs of parents as well as the students. Parents can join live meetings and provide feedback. PVUSD sends out updates on the web at least once a week to provide current information and resources.^[13]

Teachers have received continued support for digital training throughout this timespan of distance learning. PVUSD provides a Digital Learning Resources website that provides direct assistance for teachers with technical support and access to tools and resources.^[19] The site also provides direct coaching support through the County Office of Education Teacher On Special Assignment (TOSA) program. Parents and students have access to the website with online activities and distance learning support.^[20] Teachers have continued to receive training and support throughout the pandemic. They have put in hours of unpaid time to participate in trainings. While everyone – teachers, administrators, students, and families – is striving to make remote learning work, it has left many of them tired and frustrated.

PVUSD has put a good deal of effort into reaching students and families who speak Spanish and Mixteco bajo, with multi-lingual family support staff and phone-based and in-person technical help.^[21] The PVUSD superintendent has said it is important to listen, provide information, and engage families in their preferred language.^[21]

As schools reopen, safety protocols are a big challenge, as well as how to continue to help students academically, socially, and emotionally. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has laid out safeguards such as masks, physical distancing, sanitizing, ventilation upgrades, testing and contact tracing.^[22] Randi Weingarten, AFT president, said:

We must reimagine learning beyond COVID-19 and create the conditions to help all children thrive. Rather than the traditional spring state testing, we should assess and respond to students' wide-ranging needs; support our most vulnerable students; focus on educators' professional learning and growth to meet these unprecedented challenges; and promote equity and excellence in all of our public schools.^[22]

The PVUSD Board of Trustees has approved a plan to ease graduation requirements for high school students who have experienced learning loss. It was found that 85% of the seniors at Aptos High School are on track to graduate this year, along with 66% of those at Pajaro Valley High and 65% at Watsonville High – all percentages down from previous years.^[23]

As one local parent said, “Hopefully the focus won’t be on catching students up academically, but rather that they talk about the experience. There is a lot to be learned.”^[24]

Conclusion

The PVUSD Board of Trustees approved a plan to close all district schools for two weeks beginning on March 16, 2020. The District moved quickly, putting previously thought-out plans in place that provided for distance learning and a path for communicating with students, teachers, and families.

PVUSD is to be applauded for its agile and broad response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first five days after the schools shut down the district furnished the students with computers and internet access. Teachers and students received training in distance learning. Critical social services were provided to families.

PVUSD can learn from the immediate and commendable actions taken to put distance learning in place. This is the time to evaluate what worked and what didn’t. Classes look different as safety measures are established and there are new concerns as students and teachers have returned to the classroom. PVUSD services need to be provided as the community heals from COVID-19, especially to those most vulnerable and difficult to locate in its District.

Findings

- F1.** Since distance learning will continue after schools reopen, students, teachers, families, and administrators will need to continue learning new ways to operate and will require continued support.
- F2.** Students, teachers, and families were well-served by the continuously-updated information provided by the PVUSD Superintendent's weekly FAQ postings on PVUSD's website.
- F3.** The administrators, teachers, parents, and students themselves are all understandably concerned about students' social-emotional issues arising from the pandemic.
- F4.** The reasons that approximately 2% of PVUSD students have been "lost" are not well understood. Possible answers might include that they are either not logging on at all, or have left the area.
- F5.** The Safe Spaces program has worked well, supporting online learning as well as providing counseling and food to students.
- F6.** Even with all the training provided to teachers, and internet accessibility provided to students, distance learning has not worked well for some students.
- F7.** Additional upgrades in school air quality systems and furniture are necessary to comply with COVID-19 safety protocols.

Recommendations

- R1.** Within six months, to prepare for continued distance learning, and possible future situations, PVUSD should survey students, teachers and parents to evaluate what worked and what didn't work regarding distance learning. (F1, F2, F6)
- R2.** PVUSD should continue the Safe Spaces program. Evaluate and modify over time as students return to school. (F5)
- R3.** PVUSD should continue to keep their website updated with information and resources for teachers, students and families, including social-emotional issues, community support organizations, and educational resources. (F1, F2)
- R4.** Within six months, PVUSD should use forthcoming federal and state money to provide summer and after-school programs to help with learning loss and social-emotional issues. (F3, F6)
- R5.** Within nine months, PVUSD should use forthcoming funds to make necessary upgrades in air quality systems and furniture in the schools. (F7)
- R6.** Within six months, "lost" students who are still in the district should be located and their needs addressed. (F4)

Commendations

- C1.** PVUSD rose to the occasion to meet the needs of teachers, students and families during the pandemic. Resources including training, internet access, food, clothing, housing, and mental health services were provided; communication was prioritized.
- C2.** There is expanded internet connectivity now in the Watsonville/Pajaro area due to the efforts of PVUSD, Cruzio, and Equal Access Santa Cruz County..
- C3.** There is increased collaboration among agencies that provide services and support, including Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, the Santa Cruz County Office of Education, and PVUSD.

Required Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors	F3, F6, F7	R4, R5	90 Days September 15, 2021
Board of Trustees, Pajaro Valley Unified School District	F1–F7	R1–R6	90 Days September 15, 2021
Superintendent, Santa Cruz County Office of Education	F3, F7	R4, R5	60 Days August 16, 2021

Invited Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Superintendent, Pajaro Valley Unified School District	F1, F2, F4–F6	R1–R3, R6	90 Days September 15, 2021

Definitions

- **CARES Act:** The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (2020) and the Coronavirus Response and Consolidated Appropriations Act (2021) provided fast and direct economic assistance for American workers, families, small businesses, and industries.
- **Chromebooks:** laptops that run on Google's operating system known as "Chrome OS," or Chrome Operating System, instead of Windows or Mac OS. These notebooks should be connected to the internet, as most of the applications reside online and require a connection to run web applications and store data.^[25]
- **Distance or Remote Learning:** a method of studying in which lectures are broadcast or classes are conducted by correspondence or over the internet, without the student's needing to attend a school or college in person.
- **Hotspots:** a specific location that provides internet access via a wireless local area network.
- **Latinx:** a person of Latin American origin or descent.
- **LGBTQ:** lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (or questioning).^[26]
- **PVPSA:** Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance. Their mission is to improve the quality of life of youth and families of the greater Pajaro Valley by providing health education, mental health, and substance use services, and by advocating for public policies that protect the wellbeing of the community.
- **PVUSD:** Pajaro Valley Unified School District.
- **PVUSD Board of Trustees:** Trustees are elected by the community to provide leadership and citizen oversight of the district's schools.
- **Safe Spaces:** places that provide a supportive and supervised environment, including academic assistance, counseling, and snacks, for high need students who will benefit from specialized intervention and support. They are located at Aptos Junior High, Radcliff, Mar Vista, Pajaro Middle School, and Watsonville High.^[27]
- **TOSA:** Teacher on Special Assignment.

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PVUSD Distance Learning Resources

<https://sites.google.com/pvUSD.net/learnfromhomeresources/home>

SC County Office of Education <https://www.sccoe.org/>

Pajaro Valley Teachers Union <https://pvft.net/>

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