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Public Health Committee: Amador County's Preparedness in the Event of an Ebola Outbreak

SUMMARY

The West African Ebola epidemic has been a humanitarian crisis since spring of 2014. The first known case in the United States was in Houston, Texas in October of that year, when a patient from Liberia was dealt with improperly and subsequently died. This incident raised awareness of public health preparedness nationwide.

Although only a slight possibility exists that Ebola will appear in Amador County, preparedness is crucial, so the 2014-2015 Amador County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) chose to examine the level of local readiness.

Sutter Amador Hospital in Jackson is certified as a designated frontline healthcare facility in an Ebola or other contagious disease event. In addition to the hospital, the local coalition of entities who cooperate and/or could be called upon includes the Amador County Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services (OES), who would act as communication central, plus about twenty others. As a member of the extensive and well-supported Sutter Health system, Sutter Amador has the facilities, resources, training network, and personnel to deal with issues such as testing, safety equipment for personnel, through to disposal of hazardous waste at the end of treatment. The hospital is in close contact with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) at all times; news and information are monitored constantly, and training of hospital personnel is ongoing.

The Grand Jury found that locally, although such a situation is unlikely, the seriousness of the appearance of Ebola within the County made it necessary that proper precautions be set up so response can be rapid and effective. Such precautions have been undertaken at much expense of time and cost to the members of the coalition. Hospital staff and administration, as well as the other coalition participants who would deal with any aspect of an Ebola event in Amador County, expressed confidence that their preparedness level is very high. The hospital administration has requested recognition of the coalition members for this effort.

AUTHORITY

By authority of Penal Code §925, a Grand Jury shall investigate and report on the operations of the County, including those operations, accounts and records of any special legislative district or other district in the County created pursuant to State law, for which the officers of the County are serving in their ex officio capacities as officers of the districts.

BACKGROUND

Ebola virus disease was nearly unknown until spring of 2014, when news of a rapidly-spreading hemorrhagic fever, usually causing death, was disseminated worldwide. The disease was recognized initially only in West Africa, where it became rampant partly because of cultural traditions of dealing with the dead. However, the first known case in the US, in Houston in September-October of 2014, concluded with the death of the patient, who was from Liberia. The outcome in this case was most likely because of ignorance of proper procedures at the hospital where he was treated, due to unfamiliarity with Ebola disease. This event raised nationwide awareness of the immediate need for public health awareness and preparedness regarding Ebola.

It is very unlikely that an Ebola-infected person will have to be treated in Amador County. However, as the results of such an infection could be horrendous, the 2015 Grand Jury decided to look into how well-prepared the local health care community is to deal with Ebola or any highly contagious disease.

Not an investigation per se, the Grand Jury intends to report on its assessment of all the parts of the coordinated effort undertaken by the County-wide coalition of entities who would deal with any aspect of an Ebola incident.

METHOD OF STUDY

At the Grand Jury's request, Sutter Amador Hospital administration and staff, in addition to other County and State entities who would be directly involved in treating a suspected Ebola patient here, held an informational meeting at the hospital with several members of the Grand Jury.

Participants in the meeting at the hospital included members of County Public Health, local ambulance, Regional Environmental Health, various public information entities, and mortuary staff. Several hospital departments were represented for explanations of facilities, sequence and timing; emergency procedures and equipment were described and demonstrated. The hospital distributed examples of informational handouts developed by various public health entities, which are available to the public.

There was a later interview by Grand Jury members with staff of the Amador County Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services (OES), regarding the role it would assume as countywide communications central in a suspected or verified case of Ebola.

DISCUSSION

Preliminary inquiries by members of the Grand Jury revealed that Sutter Amador Hospital in Jackson is certified as a designated frontline healthcare facility in an Ebola or other contagious disease event. Hospital staff expressed great willingness to be part of a presentation to the Grand Jury, along with members of the local coalition that has been established to deal with all the

aspects of such an event. This coalition includes the local OES, who would act as communications central, plus more than twenty other entities. OES has stated that there are plans to upgrade in general all local means of communication in the future, with increased numbers of cell towers and more digital, rather than analog, equipment.

Establishing and demonstrating local readiness for an Ebola outbreak

Amador County Public Health reported that since October of 2014, after the first Ebola patient/fatality in Houston, Texas, the CDC and all regional hospital and health professionals scrambled to establish robust protocols for discovering and treating the disease. Locally, there is weekly teleconferencing with the CDC, which includes rural representatives, for the purposes of comparing notes, updating what is being learned and adjusting procedures if necessary. Handouts from various public health entities, containing guidance for self-evaluation and many other topics, have evolved and are available at Sutter Amador.

The hospital has three isolation rooms ready, including one that is negative pressure. Specialized protective suits with respirators have been designed for personnel dealing with a possible/confirmed Ebola patient, and the hospital has approximately \$100,000 in special gear on hand. During the presentation to the Grand Jury at the hospital, proper donning and removal of the personal protective equipment (PPE), for which there are strict guidelines and two staff members required, was demonstrated. Photographs were taken by a Grand Jury member, and included as Appendix A. All staff members who would use this equipment have practiced this “donning and doffing.”

In November of 2014, a full readiness emergency drill involving hospital, ambulance, OES and other coalition personnel took place with two “Ebola patients” as the subjects. The isolation rooms at the hospital were readied, and appropriate staff was fully-suited in the specialized PPE. Because of the newness of the subject at that time, some procedural shortfalls were discovered, and were repaired. A list of local coalition participants is included in this report as Appendix B (the Amador County Jail and Animal Control are not shown on the list, but are also members of the coalition).

Any need to adjust procedures is constantly monitored through the CDC.

Amador Public Health stated that the attempt to discover a preventive vaccine for Ebola has been fast-tracked by the CDC.

Sutter Amador Hospital as part of the Sutter Health system would be able to deal with extensive/expensive issues such as testing, safety equipment for personnel, through to disposal of hazardous waste by its own contractor at the end of treatment here. An Ebola patient, after confirmed diagnosis and preliminary treatment at this hospital, would be

transported within two or three days to one of two designated treatment centers located within about an hour's drive. The two treatment centers are Kaiser Hospital South and UC Davis Medical Center, both in Sacramento. At any stage, cooperation with other coalition members (ambulance, Health Department, Sheriff, Highway Patrol, etc.) would be organized, as needed, by the OES.

A suspected case of Ebola: What will happen?

During the presentation at the hospital, the entire sequence from presentation at the hospital Emergency Room of a person with suspicious symptoms, to the transportation of the confirmed patient to one of the nearby treatment centers, through to the disposal of the potentially large quantity of hazardous waste materials and decontamination of the isolation room, was described to the Grand Jury.

The first indication of possible Ebola in a patient, determined immediately either over the phone or in person by a staff questionnaire, would be a fever in an individual who has been to, or has been in contact with someone who has been to, West Africa. If these answers are positive and the timing is correct, the patient must be isolated. If necessary, direction is given to the individual to drive, or be driven by another person or ambulance, to the Hospital Emergency Room.

Blood from the patient is taken here but tested at an assessment facility, probably in Los Angeles. A point of care (bedside) station is set up in the isolation room where the patient is situated immediately by a predetermined set of rules, until test results are finalized. If the initial blood test is negative, a second test must be done at 72 hours; if this is still negative for Ebola, then staff looks for another cause for the observed symptoms.

If the patient does test positive for Ebola, treatment continues here while transport to a designated treatment hospital is arranged, as soon as possible. California and County Public Health, and the CDC, are notified immediately and kept in the loop. During this process, patient care staff rotation protocol requires two fully-suited trained individuals attending at all times, on a two-hour shift rotation, until the transfer of the patient takes place. There are also protocols for appropriate isolation of family members or others who have been in contact with him/her; these could require enforcement. Public information officers will stay in touch with the situation and handle any media issues, as well as questions from residents. Regarding privacy, there are very strict guidelines, with big fines for any violations of Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations.

The local ambulance company representative told the Grand Jury that the safe transport of an Ebola patient has been resolved; the driver of the ambulance would be isolated from the rear by means of secured plastic sheeting, and a suited individual would accompany

the patient when possible. Spread of the disease is still believed to be through contact with bodily fluids and not through the air. Any ambulance response in a case of even *suspected* Ebola becomes “measured” rather than “rapid.” Supportive care would be given to the patient, with minimum exposure to those giving it. For transporting a confirmed Ebola victim, a personal vehicle followed by an equipped ambulance and personnel could be the scenario if the risk index is very high. There is no mandated response or transport time, although a Kaiser doctor wrote the procedure manual for transport after field screening had taken place. Bio waste is disposed of per protocol.

In the unfortunate case of an Ebola fatality, the local mortuary has its own protocols to follow. The mortuary representative told the Grand Jury that the possibility of its having to deal with an Ebola casualty is extremely remote, because a confirmed case would not be treated here but rather in a treatment center. There are procedures in place, however, which include mainly the absolute containment of body fluids, and other recommended measures. No embalming or autopsy would typically be done, and burial would be preferred to cremation. This mortuary has not yet had to deal with any extremely serious infectious disease, but they do have hazmat equipment and feel they are ready.

Covering the costs; declaring preparedness

There was concern about the costs brought upon the frontline hospital in meeting the CDC guidelines for dealing with a suspected or verified Ebola patient, and how they would affect insurance issues. The Grand Jury was told that Sutter Health has a generous policy regarding “inability to pay” and would cover staffing and other costs if necessary, although it would be a challenge. Procedures have evolved and improved greatly since October of 2014, and the Sutter system has a large pool of help and equipment, even including its own certified “cleanup” team for decontamination purposes. The hospital has funding streams for its community preparedness needs, but County Public Health and other local entities could go directly to the Board of Supervisors if unusual costs were incurred.

Sutter Amador Hospital is believed by its staff to be fully prepared for its role as a designated frontline healthcare facility. Other coalition partners expressed their confidence as well; it was stated and agreed upon by the coalition participants that every member does have a plan in place and understands its role.

FINDINGS

- F1.** Although its appearance in Amador County is unlikely, the highly contagious Ebola virus disease has become of worldwide concern, thus it is of great importance for local health professionals at every level to prepare to deal with it.

- F2.** A coalition of health care workers and the other agencies in the County who might be involved with any aspect of an outbreak has been formed, and there has been constant communication with the CDC to assure that members are kept up to speed with any new information or procedures on the Ebola front.
- F3.** Sutter Amador Hospital is a designated frontline healthcare facility in area dealings with Ebola or any highly contagious disease.
- F4.** Amador county entities who would be involved directly with Ebola disease have practiced the parts they would play and have expressed confidence that they are ready for a real emergency.

RECOMMENDATION

- R1.** Members of the Amador County coalition of public health workers and other entities who have prepared to handle an Ebola crisis would very much appreciate recognition for the great effort that has gone into organizing such a large cooperative venture. Their stated policy of working together towards preparing to deal with Ebola, or other serious contagious disease, has already been well established. The Grand Jury agrees, and highly recommends that there be public acknowledgement of this venture.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §933 (c), a response to this report is required. No later than 90 days after the Grand Jury submits a final report on the operations of any public agency subject to its reviewing authority, the governing body of the public agency shall comment on the Findings and Recommendations.

APPENDICES

- Appendix A: Photos of Personal Protective Hazmat suit
- Appendix B: List of Health Coalition Participants



**APPENDIX A:
DONNING OF PERSONAL PROTECTIVE HAZMAT SUIT AND EQUIPMENT**



Public Health Committee: Upcountry Smoke

SUMMARY

A complaint was received by the 2014-2015 Amador County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) regarding the burning of yard waste materials, i.e. leaves, pine needles, in the upcountry area within Amador County (County). According to the complaint, such burning results in excessive amounts of unhealthy air for everyone, and the complainant requested that the Grand Jury look at ways to eliminate it entirely. The Grand Jury researched ways the smoke problem could be alleviated, looking into burn regulations and permits within the County, what other forms of green waste management are available, and the role of our county officials in preventing this public health problem.

The County has an outdoor burn permit process which defines burn regulations. The County's Air Resources Board (ARB) has taken measures including participation in public awareness meetings and arranging the placement of dumpsters in various locations upcountry for yard trash collection, thereby allowing for avoidance of burning at all. There is a local company who will convert yard debris transported to their location into compost, topsoil and mulch, which is then for sale to the public, again making it possible for citizens to avoid burning.

Informing the citizens of the County about proper burn practices, in addition to alternatives to burning, would help eliminate or at least reduce smoke levels due to improper or unnecessary burning. These are the goals of this investigation.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Our county is a beautiful place to live and to visit. Most property owners and residents take pride in keeping up the appearance of their property. In the upcountry areas of the County, where many large native trees and shrubs are part of the landscape, it is extremely important to maintain properties in a safe manner, as fire is a big concern. The fear of brush fires in the County is elevated now, due to the California water shortage, with very dry conditions making it especially important to keep properties cleared in accordance with reasonable fire safe policies.

Burning of pine needles and other yard debris is legal, with an outdoor burn permit when required, if all the regulations are followed. However, non-compliant burn procedures, such as burning damp materials or garbage, contribute greatly to the unpleasant levels of smoke and particulate matter that may result in health problems for residents nearby. Even properly-burned green waste will produce smoke, which for some residents is always an issue. There are alternatives in the County for disposal of the sometimes large quantities of green waste produced when keeping properties attractive and fire safe.

AUTHORITY

Under Penal Code §925, the Grand Jury shall investigate and report on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments, or functions of the county ...and make such recommendations as it may deem proper and fit.

METHOD OF STUDY

In conducting this investigation of ways to reduce smoke from outdoor burning, the following activities were undertaken by the Grand Jury:

- Review of county burn permit and regulations
- Visit to Vicini Brothers, a green waste recycling facility
- Attendance at the meeting “Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fire” called by District 3 Supervisor Lynn Morgan in April of 2015
- Contact with local ARB
- Site trips to locate green waste bins
- Review of informational websites

DISCUSSION

A written complaint was sent to the Grand Jury by a county resident of the upcountry area wherein the complainant objected to the burning of yard debris. Unhealthful levels of smoke are frequently produced and measures should be taken to eliminate such burning entirely, according to the complaint. The complainant asserted that many people suffer when the air is laden with smoke, and that other environmentally sound means of disposal, such as recycling, should be adopted.

The Grand Jury agrees with the basis of the complaint that any level of smoke in the air can be particularly unhealthful for some people. Additionally, any noticeable level may be considered annoying by many and is probably a health issue for all. An investigation into burn alternatives in the county was initiated with the goal of helping to inform the public about them.

Burn permits and regulations

A county resident who wishes to burn any amount of yard trash outdoors must first determine whether it is a Burn Permissive Day. These are determined by the ARB on a day-to-day basis. The Amador Air District (AAD) provides a central Burn Day Information Line, (209) 223-6246, for all city and county residents. Burning is by permit only during certain times of the year. This is also available on the Information Line.

If a burn pile is four feet or more in diameter, a special permit from the local AAD is required, and a yearly fee must be paid.

If outdoor burning is to be done within one of the incorporated cities of Jackson, Sutter Creek, Amador City, Plymouth, or Ione, their regulations have jurisdiction.

The local AAD (www.co.amador.ca.us/services/amador-air-district), the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection CAL FIRE (www.fire.ca.gov), and Amador Fire Safe Council (AFSC) (www.amadorfiresafe.org) websites all contain important information and downloads about proper burn practices. Permit applications may be found online at the AAD website.

Public awareness meeting for up-country residents

District 3 Supervisor Lynn Morgan arranged a meeting of citizens with representatives of the ARB, AFSC, CAL FIRE, Amador County Solid Waste Management, Amador Public Health, Amador Fire Protection District and the US Forest Service on April 14, 2015. Issues around burning were discussed because there have been many complaints to her about smoke, including its hazard to health and safety (such as impairing a driver's vision), and the need for people to be more aware of their smoke's impacts on neighboring people.

Further topics at this meeting included: the necessity to comply with CAL FIRE regulations about keeping properties fire safe; improper burning (damp green waste, various kinds of garbage); permits and regulations about outdoor burning, and the roles of the ARB, which are to monitor air quality, enforce the burn regulations and provide information about alternatives to burning. Outdoor burning can be a large component of local air quality issues.

Supervisor Morgan informed the attendees that the AFSC has been awarded a significant grant to help seniors and anyone else who is unable, either physically or financially, to keep their property fire-safe. Additionally, there is a chipper program that can help whole neighborhoods. Information about either program is available at (209) 295-6200.

Alternatives to burning, measures taken by ARB, green waste collection dumpsters

In addition to its role in determining burn regulations, the ARB tries to discourage burning. At the April upcountry meeting, the ARB representative reminded residents that it is directing the placement and monitoring of centrally-located collection containers (dumpsters) for yard debris in two locations in their area. Periodically, the full ones are removed and replaced. Full dumpsters are taken to the Vicini Brothers, a green waste recycling center on Willow Creek Road, southwest of Plymouth.

Residents may hire various individuals to clear their properties and haul away the resulting debris, or they may gather and transport it themselves to these containers.

It was noticed by Grand Jury members who live upcountry that occasionally trash, other than yard debris, appeared near or inside these dumpsters.

If preferred, yard waste can be taken by residents of all the areas in the county to one of the ACES Waste Services (ACES) facilities, in either Pine Grove or Ione, or directly to Vicini Brothers. Yard waste from the ACES locations is also taken to the Vicini Brothers.

The Vicini Brothers, a green waste recycling facility

In March of 2015, the Grand Jury visited the Vicini Brothers, LLC, a recycling facility (www.vicinibrothers.com) which has been in operation for more than five years. The owners/managers provided a tour and information about their operation which is located on Willow Creek Road near Plymouth. The Grand Jury was given an extensive tour of the Vicini property.

At the Vicini Brothers facility, clean, loose green waste (including grass, weeds, bushes, trees and tree stumps, leaves, pine needles, etc.) is accepted in any quantity. The processing of the received debris begins with grinding and then composting. This can take a year, during which the large piles, grouped by starting date, are watered and turned frequently, and monitored constantly for heat levels. The owners reported that there is great danger of fire because of the intense heat produced during this process.

When composting is completed, the material is screened. The larger pieces of bark and wood are separated out and sold as landscape mulch, and the rest is either sold as compost or is blended with local soils to sell as topsoil. As required if any of these products are to be sold to any public agency, all of them undergo quarterly testing, and are kept in compliance with United States Composting Council standards. Vicini Brothers sells its products wholesale and to the public.

FINDINGS

- F1.** In the upcountry area of Amador County, because of the fire-safe practices required for citizens to protect their properties, large quantities of yard debris may be produced.

- F2.** Outdoor burning in the County is legal if regulations are followed, including obtaining permits when required.

- F3.** When green waste is burned the resulting smoke can be both a serious health issue to some individuals and a visual hazard for drivers.
- F4.** The burning of garbage, damp pine needles, or other plant materials can produce especially obnoxious smoke.
- F5.** Residents may not always consider the hazard or nuisance of their smoke to their neighbors.
- F6.** Public awareness meetings are held to educate citizens about better burn practices and to suggest ways to avoid burning altogether.
- F7.** There are alternatives to burning the prunings, trimmings, pine needles, etc. which are accumulated when properties are properly cleared and maintained.
- F8.** All County residents can transport yard debris to either of the Aces Waste facilities or directly to Vicini Brothers.
- F9.** Upcountry citizens may not be aware that the ARB provides large dumpsters in their area for yard debris disposal.
- F10.** Vicini Brothers eventually receives all of the green waste collected by the two ACES facilities and the ARB dumpsters. Through a series of processes it is converted to mulch, compost, and topsoil available for sale to the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1.** Local agencies who deal with fire safety and air quality in the County must increase their outreach efforts to educate residents on how to control and reduce smoke levels from yard waste burnings.
- R2.** These local agencies may consider using the following methods to publicize information about safe burning, alternatives to burning, and the local resources available:
 - Public service announcements (PSAs) on local TV and radio
 - Notices in the local newspapers
 - Posting information in public places

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §933 (c), a response to this report is required. No later than 90 days after the Grand Jury submits a final report on the operations of any public agency subject to its

reviewing authority, the governing body of the public agency shall comment on the Findings and Recommendations.