

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF EMERGENCY SERVICES

Its Oversight of the State's Emergency Plans and Procedures Needs Improvement While Its Future Ability to Respond to Emergencies May Be Hampered by Aging Equipment and Funding Concerns

REPORT NUMBER 2002-113, JULY 2003

Governor's Office of Emergency Services' response as of August 2004

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services' (OES) and counties' ability to coordinate and respond to multijurisdictional and multiagency emergencies revealed the following:

- OES lacks a formal process to regularly review and update the State Emergency Plan and its related annexes.*
 - OES does not consistently perform activities needed to evaluate and improve its coordination of emergency responses under the Standardized Emergency Management System.*
 - Clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the State's Office of Homeland Security and OES would be beneficial.*
 - With aging equipment and other equipment not in place, OES's ability to task its own resources during an emergency may be limited.*
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The Joint Legislative Audit Committee (committee) requested that the Bureau of State Audits (bureau) review and assess the Governor's Office of Emergency Services' (OES) policies and procedures for assessing and coordinating multijurisdictional and multiagency responses to emergencies under the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) and the State Emergency Plan (emergency plan). Further, the committee requested the bureau to determine if OES is maintaining the emergency plan as required by law and whether a sample of local government emergency operation centers (EOCs) are adequately prepared to respond to emergencies following SEMS. We found that the emergency plan and related annexes provide adequate guidance to agencies responding to multijurisdictional emergencies, but that OES lacks a formal process to regularly evaluate and update these plans. Additionally, OES is not consistently evaluating the use of SEMS by preparing statutorily required after-action reports following all declared disasters. Also, OES has had difficulty in acquiring and maintaining emergency response equipment due to what it asserts is inadequate funding. Finally, our review of six county EOCs found that they had adequate plans and training to prepare for emergencies. However, OES's recent survey of all county EOCs reveals that some counties are in need of potentially costly upgrades to improve their ability to respond to emergencies.

Finding #1: OES has not established a formal process to regularly evaluate and update the emergency plan and related annexes.

Although we found that the emergency plan and related annexes adequately guide agencies to respond to emergencies, OES lacks a formal process to regularly evaluate and update these documents as necessary. OES indicates that previous emergency plan updates were made in 1959, 1984, 1989, 1998, and 2003. OES's review of the plan in 2003 was part of a federal effort to ensure that the emergency plan is current. When we asked whether OES regularly updates the emergency plan and related annexes, the director of OES's Planning and Technological Assistance Branch explained that they do not, but that they are updated when changes in state or federal laws impact emergency management, or when changes in regulations, policies, or significant procedures occur. Although OES has not established a formal process to regularly review the emergency plan and its related annexes, other states regularly update their plans so that they may incorporate lessons learned into their plans. Absent a formal and regular evaluation process for the emergency plan and its related annexes, the emergency plan and annexes may not reflect current practices or provide sufficient guidance during an emergency.

To ensure that the emergency plan and its related annexes are regularly evaluated and updated when necessary, we recommended that OES develop and follow formal procedures for conducting regular assessments of these plans to determine if updates are required.

OES Action: Partial corrective action taken.

OES indicates that it has drafted revisions to its Policies and Procedures Manual to address the need for a process to formally and periodically review the emergency plan. In conjunction with this effort, OES states that it has developed a checklist, which includes planning criteria from multiple state and federal publications, that will guide its efforts in updating the emergency plan in the future. OES plans to update this checklist with the development of the National Response Plan in order to assure state practices and plans are in concert with federal operations. OES plans to finalize its review procedures once the National Response Plan is approved.

Finding #2: OES has not consistently evaluated the use of the SEMS.

OES is missing important opportunities to identify and make improvements to SEMS. This is because OES fails to consistently and adequately prepare, or follow up on, the statutorily required after-action reports following declared disasters to incorporate lessons learned during proclaimed emergencies. OES also does not follow its own policies of maintaining SEMS through regular meetings of its SEMS advisory board and technical group—two user groups that are intended to review SEMS issues and make recommendations for improvement. Since SEMS establishes the organizational framework through which multiple agencies can jointly respond to an emergency, it seems reasonable to expect OES to take a more proactive role in ensuring that this critical element of California’s emergency response effort is consistently evaluated for further improvements and enhancements.

To ensure that SEMS remains a workable method to respond to emergencies, OES should more consistently evaluate its use and identify areas of weaknesses and needed improvements. Specifically, OES should do the following:

- Institute internal controls to ensure it receives after-action reports from all responding entities to an emergency, such as requiring after-action reports prior to reimbursing local agencies for response-related personnel costs. Further, OES should ensure that the reports by local governments evaluate the use of SEMS for any needed improvements and enhancements.
- Prepare after-action reports after each declared disaster that review emergency response and recovery activities.
- Develop a system that tracks weaknesses noted in the after-action reports, which unit is responsible for correcting those weaknesses, and what corrective actions were taken for each weakness.
- Reconvene the SEMS advisory board and technical group to foster more communication on the use of SEMS, and to provide OES advice and recommendations on SEMS.

OES Action: Partial corrective action taken.

OES reports adopting policies and procedures for the development of after-action reports that address response actions taken; application of and compliance to SEMS; suggested modifications to SEMS; and plans and procedures, training needs, and follow-up recommendations. These policies require that the after-action report begin with an initial critique of successes and areas in need of improvement at each response level. OES requires these levels to prepare and submit after-action report survey forms, which serve as the basis for a comprehensive review. OES uses statewide forums of the emergency response community to address and develop the recommendations cited in the after-action reports. OES is also in the process of developing a database to track after-action report findings and resolutions. Further, OES states that it is in the process of re-convening the SEMS technical and advisory groups in order to revitalize the SEMS Technical and Maintenance System. Finally, OES completed the after-action report for the fall 2003 wildfire siege and is working on reports for two more recent disasters.

Finding #3: Data problems prevent OES from evaluating how well it coordinates resources during emergencies.

Inaccurate and missing data in its Response Information Management System (RIMS) prevents OES from evaluating how well it coordinates responses during emergencies. Because OES is not using RIMS to capture accurate mission approval times and resource arrival times, it lacks data to evaluate how well it coordinates emergency responses. Mission approval times are important because the faster OES approves a resource request, the faster resources are likely to arrive on scene. Our review of RIMS data revealed that 13 out of 27 sampled mission approvals were late, and we were unable to determine the resource approval time for two of the requests. Furthermore, our testing showed that RIMS users did not report resource arrival times for 24 out of 27 resource requests in our sample. If OES had this information, it could evaluate whether resources are arriving promptly to emergency sites while better tracking the resources tasked to emergencies.

We recommended that OES take steps to ensure that it can accurately track how long it takes to approve resource requests and pinpoint when those resources arrived at the emergency.

OES Action: Partial corrective action taken.

OES indicates that it plans to update the capabilities of RIMS in order to address our recommendations. In October 2003, OES held a meeting of its RIMS Working Group that agreed upon enhancements to the RIMS system, including the addition of a web portal that will contain all secure reports, data, and forms. OES also is integrating new protocols of the federal Department of Homeland Security into RIMS. While OES was able to obtain federal grant money to make various improvements to RIMS, numerous disaster response activities have delayed implementation. Further, OES indicates that it is awaiting Department of Finance approval of a RIMS special project report.

Finding #4: OES needs to ensure key staff are properly trained.

Citing a lack of funding, OES has not conducted a needs assessment to determine the training needs for management and workers that staff state and regional centers. OES has developed an individual training plan (training plan) program; however, OES had only developed training plans for seven of the 14 state center staff we reviewed. Although the training plan can be a useful tool, because OES does not use it for all state center staff and does not provide guidance to all supervisors preparing training plans, OES cannot ensure that all state center staff receive the training they need to effectively respond to emergencies.

To ensure that state agencies—including itself—are adequately prepared to respond to emergencies within the State, OES should determine the most critical training that emergency operations center staff, at state and regional levels, need in order to fulfill their duties, and then allocate existing funding or seek the additional funding it needs to deliver the training.

OES Action: Corrective action taken.

OES revised its training policies in June 2003, outlining the core competencies for all OES staff. OES maintains that the several activations of the State Operations Center and Regional Operational Centers have provided additional opportunities for appropriate on-the-job training. To further augment its training policy, OES has developed an internal working group to prepare an Emergency Operations Guide that will detail the agency policies and procedures for emergency operations.

Finding #5: Clarification of the roles and responsibilities of OHS and OES would be beneficial.

In February 2003, the governor established the Office of Homeland Security (OHS) within the Office of the Governor. Some of the responsibilities assigned to OHS by the executive order and to the director of OES appear to have the potential to overlap. For example, under the California Emergency Services Act, the director of OES is assigned the responsibility of coordinating the emergency activities of all state agencies during a state of war emergency or other state emergency, and every state agency and officer is required to cooperate with the director in rendering assistance. However, under the executive order, OHS is assigned the responsibility of coordinating security efforts of all departments and agencies of the State and the activities of all state agencies pertaining to terrorism-related issues, and is designated as the principal point of contact for the governor. Moreover, the director of OES is required to report to the governor through OHS, but that reporting function is not limited to issues related to state security or terrorism, and thus appears to require OES to make all reports to the governor through OHS.

To ensure the State is adequately prepared to address emergencies and to avoid misunderstandings, OHS should work with the governor on how best to clarify the roles and responsibilities of OHS and OES.

OES Action: None.

OES indicated that there have not been any formal changes that further define the relationship of OES and OHS. OES maintains that both agencies' roles and responsibilities should be viewed as a necessary partnership to manage the emerging threat of terrorism and homeland security issues, while also maintaining an all-hazards approach to emergency management.

Finding #6: Equipment concerns may impact OES's future ability to respond to emergencies.

OES has had difficulty acquiring and maintaining emergency response and communication equipment due to what it asserts is inadequate funding. Specifically, 26 percent of OES's active fire engines have been in service for longer than the 17-year useful life that OES has adopted. OES also has no heavy urban search and rescue vehicles, which help extricate people from collapsed structures, despite a statutory mandate to obtain these vehicles.

With aging equipment, and other equipment not in place, OES's ability to task its own resources during an emergency may be limited. OES has recently acquired sufficient funding to replace its aging fire engines and has taken steps to replace older fire engines, but its request for 18 heavy urban search and rescue vehicles was not funded. However, OES has not performed a current needs assessment to determine how many heavy urban search and rescue vehicles it needs in order to respond to an emergency within one hour, as required under statute.

Further, OES has not tried to establish the thermal imaging equipment-purchasing program required by law. OES's failure to take the statutorily required steps to establish this program may have denied local governments from taking advantage of an opportunity to obtain this equipment at a lower cost than they could obtain on their own. Finally, OES is facing a problem with its Operational Area Satellite Information System (OASIS), a satellite network that serves as a backup communications system, which is degrading and threatens OES's ability to coordinate with local governments should phone communications become disabled during a major emergency.

To ensure that it and local governments have the equipment to adequately respond to emergencies, OES should take the following actions:

- For its fire engine program, OES should continue with its schedule for replacing older and poor performing fire engines in the fleet.
- OES should perform a needs analysis to determine the number of heavy urban search and rescue units that are required to respond to a major earthquake. If this needs analysis concludes that additional units are required, OES should submit a budget change proposal to acquire this equipment, and it should develop a maintenance and replacement schedule for this equipment.
- OES should take the required steps to establish a thermal imaging equipment-purchasing program, including determining the interest among local governments in purchasing this equipment. However, if OES determines that it cannot identify funding sources to pay its share, OES should explore the use of the State's buying power to enter into a contract that allows local governments to purchase this equipment at a lower cost.

OES should study options to extend the life of or replace OASIS. However, if it concludes that OASIS should be replaced, OES should justify this replacement by demonstrating that maintenance costs are exorbitant and that OASIS is down for excessive periods for repair.

OES Action: Partial corrective action taken.

OES states that it has taken the following corrective actions regarding the recommendations above:

- OES indicates that 25 engines out of its current 111 fire engine fleet have been in service longer than their 17-year useful lives. To prevent an impact to public safety, OES has taken possession of 21 new engines that were purchased with prior year budget appropriations and that all of these engines have been assigned throughout the State. OES states that it is currently awaiting approval from the Department of Finance to award the bid for the next 21 replacement engines. If funds are available, OES intends to replace seven fire engines each year to comply with the 17-year replacement cycle.
- OES states that the costs for heavy urban search and rescue units have increased significantly, costing approximately \$750,000 each. However, OES continues to evaluate its prior needs assessment in order to update where these units are needed.
- OES has chaired a meeting of fire representatives across the State to address the thermal imaging equipment program. OES plans to complete a survey in August 2004 to address the feasibility of a cost-shared participation in the program, further indicating that the technical specifications will be developed in September 2004. OES indicates that it is exploring all possible funding sources for this program, including federal grants.
- OES received \$3.5 million in federal grant funds for the modernization of its OASIS system. This funding will cover final engineering and basic conversion to a modernized radio and information processing system. If future funding is available, OES intends to further improve OASIS by enhancing its connections to both the Public Switched Telephone Network and Internet.