

COMMENTARY

Audit says state unprepared for major emergency

No matter where they are on the political spectrum, just about everybody agrees that the first and most important role of government is to protect public safety. But a recent audit has concluded that the state government is falling short in one of its most fundamental tasks: planning and preparing for a natural disaster or a terrorist strike.



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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger should take note. Executives are often judged by how they and the people they direct respond in a crisis. If this review by the nonpartisan and respected Bureau of State Audits is correct, Schwarzenegger's administration risks being caught flat-footed when, inevitably, the next major emergency hits California.

A big part of the problem is with a slow-moving bureaucracy, the audit said. The state is dragging its feet in distributing federal money to local agencies and is behind schedule in reviewing emergency response plans for 35 of the 58 counties and 17 of 19 state agencies that would be asked to respond in a disaster.

In what sounds like an ominous echo from the Hurricane Katrina debacle in Louisiana last year, the state's organizational structure for disaster response, the audit said, is "neither streamlined

designed to test medical and health preparedness. The other, by the Office of Homeland Security, is supposed to be more comprehensive, testing the ability of all state and local agencies to respond to terrorist attacks in different parts of the state.

The medical exercises are supposed to activate the state's medical and mutual aid systems to be sure that when one part of the state is overwhelmed with casualties, it can quickly get help from elsewhere. But in 2004 and 2005, this capability wasn't tested because, the auditors said, the exercises were designed instead to help individual hospitals satisfy accreditation requirements.

The more comprehensive annual exercises, known as Golden Guardian, were even more disappointing. According to the audit, there were not enough participants and not enough dummy casualties to provide a realistic scenario. And key components of the response were not tested because they were either already in place when the exercise began or simply assumed to be at the ready.

The state's disaster plan says that even a moderate-size emergency would produce between 250 and 10,000 casualties. But the 2005 Golden Guardian

exercise used a scenario at the extreme low end of that range.

The exercise simulated the aftermath of an explosion that included the release of toxic chemicals. Although the exercise assumed 2,050 casualties at one location, 1,500 of those were treated and released without hospitalization. Of the remaining 550 victims, 120 were assumed to have died at the scene. Only 430 people actually needed more than superficial medical care.

In that test, no jurisdiction from Southern California participated. Only eight Northern California counties, including five in the Bay Area and three from the Sacramento Valley, were involved.

In addition, the fire and rescue mutual aid system did not receive any requests to respond in the mock emergency because the exercise was designed to have those resources already available. The ability of the state to activate its operations center and call up its staff was not tested because those participants were already in place when the exercise began.

According to a February 2006 letter from the director of Emergency Services, "inadequate integration" and "unfocused objectives" for the 2005 exercise caused "design flaws and

problems in exercise play." Local participants, the letter said, complained that the exercise was "confusing and frustrating and called into question the credibility of the state's level of preparedness."

All of this, the auditors said, adds up to a state that is probably not ready to respond as well as it should to a major emergency. At a minimum, state officials can't possibly know if they are ready or not, because they have not been tough enough on themselves or their local counterparts.

"California has stressed its capabilities to respond to only a fraction of the possible casualties of a moderate-size emergency," the audit said. "Until its statewide exercises exert sufficient and realistic stress on the medical and health systems, California cannot ensure that medical and health systems in the state are prepared to respond adequately to emergencies."

In a place that is uniquely vulnerable to earthquakes, floods, even tsunamis, let alone terrorism, that simply isn't good enough.

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