

EPIC-A COMMUNITY EFFORT
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“One of the true tests of leadership is the ability to recognize a problem before it becomes an emergency.”

-Arnold H. Glasgow

On Saturday, December 29th I was in a Montreal hotel room watching snow fall onto the city below. It was 17 degrees outside with wind out of the west. Needless to say, it was a bit nippy.

According to local media reports the recent storm was one of the largest storms in recent Montreal history. Despite the weather, traffic was moving about freely within restricted lanes blocked by heavy snow. Pedestrians were everywhere going about their business seemingly oblivious of the challenges the snow presented.

Back in Santa Barbara, a storm cell moved over San Marcos Pass and opened up with heavy rain, sleet, hail and snow on the mountain communities. Highway 154 was briefly closed by the CHP because of collisions and ice on the roadway including a collision at West Camino Cielo involving a horse trailer. Adding to the commotion were several vehicles reported over the side on Painted Cave Road along with a reported vehicle fire.

Aside from local traffic issues, lightning hit a utility pole in Painted Cave causing two poles to catch fire. The damage knocked out local power and telephone service.

It was late afternoon when I received several emails from Santa Barbara regarding problems on San Marcos Pass and in Painted Cave. To get answers, I turned to my information sources including the automated CHP website that provides dispatch information. I also checked local news websites but was unable to find anything until later in the night.

The NOAA website did not have anything regarding a storm cell or any weather warnings for the San Marcos Pass. I checked the local Forest Service Remote Automated Weather System (RAWS) stations but could not find anything that supported the weather conditions that local residents were reporting. In fact, a couple of people reported via email that the sun was out in downtown Santa Barbara.

It became clear that whatever was happening in the San Marcos Pass, it was isolated to a small area. Nonetheless, it impacted thousands of people. Anytime Highway 154 is closed it is problematic. The lack of power, telephone service and the need for emergency and utility services complicates matters for everyone.

The loss of utilities, road closures, traffic collisions and an influx of voyeurs are not new to the San Marcos Pass. In this case, the holiday did not help. The recent Lookout Fire in October created many of the same challenges.

The lack of reliable public information remains problematic. To this day, the fundamental challenge is how to get important information out quickly, efficiently, accurately and more importantly than ever, cost effectively.

The association Emergency Public Information Communicators (EPIC) was formed in early June of 2004, following the Gaviota Fire and subsequent winter floods that hit much of Santa Barbara County in 2004. There was a growing perception within public agencies and the public that emergency public information was not readily available creating negative impact on the community.

The mission of EPIC is to support collaboration amongst government and private sector public information and education officers and news media resulting in coordinating and delivering emergency public information.

Local media, government and non-governmental agencies alike were (and still are) challenged by the constant on demand for information while at the same time falling victim to reduced funding, staffing and resources to meet expanding needs.

Retired Santa Barbara County Fire Department Captain and Public Information Officer (PIO) Charlie Johnson took the lead in the formation of EPIC, Captain Johnson and EPIC members have built a highly regarded group of professionals dedicated to public information and education.

EPIC has grown over the years. In 2012 the organization was taken under the guidance of the Santa Barbara County Administrators Office and the Office of Emergency Management. The collaboration between EPIC members and the county has further solidified public and private relationship towards common goals. There is no question that this support has had a significant impact on the continued success of EPIC.

To continue the collaboration and better meet the continuing challenges confronting government and the public alike, this year the EPIC Executive Committee has expanded to include representatives from fire, law enforcement, public health, education, public works, Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), Red Cross, local government and media.

The 2013 EPIC goals include updating the PIO and media points of contact so information can be collected quicker. Additionally, EPIC is proposing the establishment of a county-wide on-call PIO “*All Risk*” pool for initial response. This program would allow the closest qualified PIO regardless of agency to be on scene of an incident until the responsible PIO having jurisdiction arrives. This idea of utilizing the closet asset to an emergency is not new. EPIC would like to apply the same concept to the PIO function.

Santa Barbara is unique in our efforts because local government, media and local non-profits are committed to improving the public information process. For example, Joe Guzzardi at the Santa Barbara County Office of Emergency Management coordinated twelve local PIO’s from various

agencies to participate in FEMA's Advanced Public Information Officer program in Emmitsburg, Maryland. This program helps to develop further PIO skills for major emergency and disaster situations. This four day course includes lectures and exercise at very limited cost to the participant and no cost to the county.

Emergencies, special and unusual events provide good opportunities to deliver agency specific messaging such as using seatbelts and smoke detectors. EPIC is working on collecting these specific messages for use by all PIO's within the county.

EPIC is working on building a media and resource library at the Santa Barbara County Emergency Operations Center. A central location for reference and resource materials will help expedite media releases and announcements.

This year's EPIC meeting topics include Media and the Law, a Joint Information Center table top exercise, Social Media for Messaging orientation, local Tsunami-Geology, a social media in a disaster table top exercise, pre-fire planning for PIO's, Web EOC, technological incidents and how to respond to active shooter situations.

The EPIC Executive Committee has developed a plan for 2013 that includes additional training, meetings in the North County and three special guest lunches.

- What is Media?
- How to manipulate the Media/How the Media manipulates you
- News vs Entertainment

EPIC will be expanding a marketing plan to find ways to improve the collection and distribution of information utilizing current and future methodologies. Print, radio, television, blogs and social media all have their unique advantages and challenges. Finding better ways to utilize these options will be an ongoing effort.

These are bold and aggressive steps towards formalizing EPIC and creating a sustainable organization for current and future PIO's. The 2013 Goals & Objectives set an agenda for improvement from the incident PIO to you the reader.

With these goals in mind, EPIC needs your assistance. Communication is a two-way process. If you have an idea regarding public information EPIC would like to hear from you. Please send your thoughts to community@wildlandresidents.org. EPIC is a community effort and you are welcome to participate.

Supporting our local media is also vital because nothing is free. Hit and run reading and listening does not support newspapers, radio or television. Even blogs cost money. If you are one who expects on demand information, you need to think about how you support your sources.

The supporting agencies of EPIC are committed to Captain Johnson's original intent of providing "emergency information when you need it to where you are." Are you ready?