

Performance Audit of the City's Disaster Response

Why OCA Did This Study

On January 22, 2024, a historic storm flooded homes and businesses. Hundreds of personnel from the City mobilized to address the crisis. Assessing the effectiveness of the City's response will ensure it is prepared to respond to future disasters. Therefore, we conducted a performance audit with three objectives:







- (1) Determine if the City's response to the January 2024 floods aligned with best practices;
- (2) Determine if roles and responsibilities were clear between the City, the County of San Diego, and other stakeholders; and
- (3) Determine if changes are necessary to the City's disaster preparedness efforts to respond effectively to and facilitate recovery from future major emergencies.

What OCA Found

Finding 1: The City effectively managed the immediate emergency response to the January 22, 2024 storm using existing plans, but when recovery demands extended beyond the City's previous responsibilities, there were no clear plans in place to meet residents' needs.

- The City effectively carried out the **initial response** to the January storm, responding to emergency calls and repairing City infrastructure.
- The City's planned response to residents' needs **did not align with expectations** of elected officials and community members.

The Gap Between City Plans and Community Expectations Led to Confusion and Frustration

Community Expectations	Planned City Response
 Long-term, non-congregate sheltering	 Congregate emergency shelter
 City support for human services	 Non-governmental organizations provide human services
 Focus on assisting residents clean up homes	 Focus on restoring City infrastructure

Source: OCA generated based on interviews and document review.

Widespread Flooding Resulted in Extensive Damage to Homes and Businesses



Source: City of San Diego Communications Department.

- **Lacking a formal role and receiving inconsistent communication led City Council Offices to respond to affected residents' needs**, which sometimes conflicted with or confused operational response activities.
- The gap between the recovery activities planned by City operations staff and those expected by the Mayor's Office led Mayor's Office staff to step into operational decisions, causing some **confusion and frustration**.
- Emergency sheltering was provided as planned, but **expectations for non-congregate and long-term sheltering went beyond the City's historical responsibilities**. Elected officials, community organizations, and affected residents reported confusion and frustration with the care and shelter services provided.
- Because the City is responsible for ensuring care and shelter services meet City residents' needs, the City should coordinate with the County and Red Cross before the next disaster to **ensure City, County, and Red Cross plans will meet residents' care and shelter needs**.
- **Working with local organizations before disasters** happen can help the City build trust and establish clear expectations.

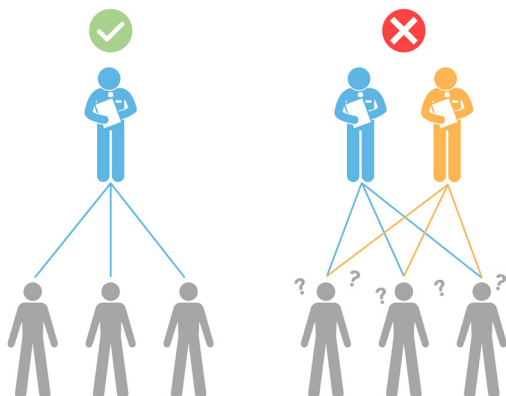
Finding 2: The City does not have a plan to ensure it quickly and effectively communicates response and recovery information with all members of the public after a disaster.

- The City followed its Emergency Operations Plan, but the plan **did not account for communication challenges unique to floods** and the community affected, raising concerns that some residents were not getting needed information.
- The Emergency Operations Plan also did not account for communicating with residents in languages other than English, resulting in **flyers containing translation errors or inaccurate information**.
- The Mayor's Office wanted to approve public communication due to the sensitive nature of the event, but this process deviated from best practices and **caused some delays and confusion**.

Finding 3: The City's use of an incident management team worked well, but a lack of policies and training led to delays.

- The City's incident management team (IMT) worked effectively to coordinate efforts to respond to infrastructure damage, but it did not have a list of pre-identified staff to fill the positions, which resulted in delays, according to IMT leadership.
- The IMT received requests from policymakers that were **outside of or conflicted with the IMT's responsibility**, causing confusion and frustration among staff.

Individuals Within an Emergency Response Structure Should Only Have One Designated Supervisor



Source: OCA generated based on review of the National Management System and interviews with the City's IMT.

Finding 4: Increasing staff training and tracking lessons learned from previous disasters can help the City prepare for future disasters.

- There were several areas in which the Office of Emergency Services (OES) could improve its disaster planning and preparedness, but the identified areas **did not have a significant impact** on the overall flood response.
- These areas include expanding guidance on volunteer and donation management, updating the Emergency Operations Center roster, and implementing a system to **assign and track** emergency management **training for City staff**.
- OES does not have a policy to ensure it consistently drafts after-action reports or a way to ensure recommendations resulting from these reports are tracked and implemented.

What OCA Recommends

We made **23 recommendations**. Key recommendations include:

- Develop a **framework that clearly sets out the City's planned overall role** in disaster response and recovery.
- Clarify and provide training on the **roles of the Mayor's Office and City Council during disasters**.
- Create a **City-specific recovery plan** that establishes the responsibilities of City departments and external partners in disaster recovery, like providing care and shelter services and engaging with the community.
- **Update disaster communication plans to ensure they meet residents' needs**, including expeditious translations when needed.
- Develop policies for **mobilizing an incident management team** in an emergency.
- Continue to **develop a training program for City leadership and staff** on the on the City's emergency response protocol.
- **Track lessons learned** from previous disasters.

The City Administration **agreed to all 23 recommendations**.

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