
Evaluating Napa County's Disaster Shelter Practices for Application in San Mateo County

Dyshun Beshears, MSW

Health Services Manager, Aging & Disability Services

San Mateo County Health

Executive Summary

This report will highlight how key aspects of Napa County's Shelter Model implemented during disaster response may be applicable in San Mateo County (SMC) to streamline cross departmental response and the amount of time that older adults and individuals living with disabilities wait for critical help.

Background and Relevance

San Mateo County (SMC) successfully operated a comprehensive Emergency Operation Center (EOC) and Departmental Operation Center for the Health Department during the pandemic. Since then, SMC has experienced periods of intense flooding and heat that necessitated the opening of these systematic disaster response systems. Despite efforts to provide streamlined and efficient service in times of urgent need, Aging and Disability Services (ADS) has not yet developed a simple action plan that is focused on the unique challenges faced by older adults and individuals living with disabilities. The goal of this project was to observe, learn from and adopt best practices from Napa County, which has successfully supported its community through multiple complex disasters. Napa county has done so much good work with disaster response and evacuations.

The project included an all-day meeting with key leaders from Napa County. Information was collected via a literary review of Napa County “Shelter Collaboration When It Counts” along with presentations from key staff including the: EOC Care and Shelter Branch Director, Care and Shelter Manager, Assistant Care and Shelter Operations Manager, Emergency Services Officer and Executive Director of Community Organizations Active in Disaster (Napa County Health and Human Services Agency, 2021). Napa County has developed a highly coordinated, well trained, and refined Care and Shelter model shaped by years of repeated natural disasters, particularly wildfires. The model emphasizes comprehensive staff preparedness through multi-level training programs, strong collaboration with community-based organizations and partner agencies, detailed guidelines, shelter procedures, robust Access and Functional Needs (AFN) services, and routine simulation exercises including annual classroom training, offsite simulations, and the Golden Eagle exercise. Napa also utilizes Functional Assessment Service Teams (FAST), consisting of trained staff and volunteers, to ensure that evacuation centers and shelters remain accessible to all evacuees.

San Mateo County’s Department of Emergency Management (SMCEM) coordinates countywide preparedness, response/protection services and activities for large scale incidents and disasters (County of San Mateo, n.d.) The SMCEM is charged with alerting, notifying and coordinating within the 20 cities and unincorporated areas when disaster strikes. The SMCEM ensures resources are available and mobilized during a disaster.

In addition to the SMCEM, San Mateo County Health provides specialized resources for medical and public health emergency preparedness. San Mateo County Health’s Department of Emergency Management Services (EMS) focuses on health specific preparations, such as vaccine distribution and supporting those with special medical needs. When SMC maneuvered the pandemic, wildfires, flooding and tsunamis, SMCEM stood up the Emergency Operations

Center (EOC), while EMS operated the Department Operations Center (DOC). Like Napa County, SMC provides training for staff preparedness, organized disaster response simulations, provided training online and in a classroom setting, while focusing on educating staff, the community and partner agencies on disaster response.

Purpose

San Mateo County has maintained a robust model for disaster response. However, with the continued growth in older adults, ADS has strong interest in learning from Napa County’s successful implementation of support during a disaster. This project focused on considering how Napa’s models might assist older adults in SMC. This project aimed to evaluate the potential application of Napa County’s disaster preparedness and Care & Shelter best practices for implementation considerations in San Mateo County. This includes identifying the structural, demographic, operational, and jurisdictional differences that limit direct adoption of Napa County’s model and determining whether specific elements of their approach can be adapted in a way that aligns with San Mateo County’s larger scale, diverse population, and complex hazard environment.

Key Differences Between Napa County and San Mateo County

Population Scale and Demographics

Table 1 provides demographic details of each county. In terms of size and the total number of residents who are in potential need of help during a disaster, Napa County’s total population is approximately 10% larger than SMC’s older adult population 60 years old and older. The type of housing, supplies, multilingual support, transportation, and medical/mental/cognitive health intervention needed for older adults presents unique challenges that are likely not as prevalent in Napa County.

San Mateo County’s racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity is represented by more than 45% of residents speaking a language other than English at home. This also requires broader communication, interpretation, and accessibility strategies. Additionally, the county faces greater scale and complexity in meeting medical, mental health, transportation, ADA accommodation, and housing needs for its older adult community.

Table 1: Comparing San Mateo and Napa County Census Data

Data Type	<u>San Mateo County*</u>	<u>Napa County**</u>
Location	San Francisco Peninsula	West of Solano County, east of Sonoma County, and north of San Pablo Bay.
Size	741 square miles, bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west and San Francisco Bay to the east.	789 square miles, in the North Bay region of the San Francisco Bay Area.
Population	Approx. 764,000 residents	Approx. 132,783 residents
Population Demographics	50% female, 56% identify as white, with a high rate of diversity. Over 45% of residents speak a language other than English at home.	50% female, 83% identify as white, with 37% identifying as Hispanic or Latino. 34% of residents speak a language other than English at home.
Size of older adult population	Older adults 60+ make up 25% of the total population.	Napa is one of four Bay Area counties where older adults outnumber residents < age 18.

*Data sourced from San Mateo County Health (n.d.) and Healthy San Mateo and the U.S Census Bureau (2024).

**Data sourced from Napa County and the U.S. Census Bureau (2024).

Number of Jurisdictions

Napa County contains five incorporated cities and towns. San Mateo County contains 23, reflecting far greater jurisdictional complexity. Each jurisdiction has its own emergency management structure, elected leadership, community-based networks and resource protocols making standardization across agencies far more difficult than in Napa County.

Size and Hazard Complexity

Napa County's disaster profile is defined primarily by recurring wildfires and flooding. Allowing the county to refine a response model tailored to predictable hazards and geographically concentrated impacts.

In contrast, SMC faces a much broader and more complex hazard profile that includes earthquakes, which could damage the San Mateo bridge, the Dumbarton bridge, wildfires, tsunamis, coastal storms, atmospheric river flooding, landslides, flooding, and potential disasters involving San Francisco International Airport. This wider range of threats requires a more versatile, scalable, and regionally flexible shelter system than the model used in Napa County.

Napa County's Model: Strengths in a Smaller-Scale System

Napa County has created an operationally strong Care and Shelter model supported by a centralized training program that includes half-day classroom instruction and simulation exercises for shelter staff pre-established Care and Shelter Management Teams with clear EOC led activation procedures and a network of partner organizations such as COAD, the Red Cross, Probation, Public Health, Mental Health, Animal Services, Napa Community Animal Emergency Response Team (Napa CART), the Salvation Army, local schools and churches. The county also maintains established shelter sites with pre-negotiated agreements and a streamlined system for supply management, checklists, health screenings, registration procedures, and overall shelter operations. However, these strengths are supported by Napa's smaller population size and limited number of jurisdictions, which allow for coordination without significant structural variation.

Challenges for SMC to adopt Napa's Model

Scale Limitations Impacting Direct Adoption

Napa's training, staffing ratios, supply management and partner coordination are structured for a county one-sixth the size of San Mateo County. Scaling these systems up would require massive increases in staffing, funding, equipment, warehouse capacity, transportation logistics and CBO coordination frameworks.

Jurisdictional Complexity

With 23 incorporated cities and towns, San Mateo County must coordinate emergency sheltering across diverse local agencies, multiple police and fire departments, varying community needs such as those in coastal towns, different local hazard risks and differing resource levels across jurisdictions. This complexity significantly increases the challenges of establishing consistent, countywide sheltering procedures compared to smaller counties with fewer jurisdictions.

Access and Functional Needs and Senior Population Demands

San Mateo County has a significantly larger senior population, which greatly increases the need for medical services, on site mental health, public health support, transportation, mobility resources, medical sheltering, hotel placements, and language translation services. Napa County's staffing levels and training models were not designed to meet this scale of Access and Functional Needs (AFN). Making direct adoption of their approach insufficient for San Mateo County's population demands.

Geographic and Hazard Diversity

San Mateo County's geographic diversity from its rugged coastline and creek systems to its dense urban corridors requires multiple sheltering strategies and site profiles. The Santa Cruz Mountains divide the county into the urbanized Bayside and the more rural, forested Coastsides, creating distinct community needs and access considerations. This includes nearly 58 miles of coastline and a mix of high-density cities such as: San Mateo, Daly City, South San Francisco, and Redwood City. The low-density agricultural areas include: Half Moon Bay, Moss Beach, Pescadero and San Gregorio. Thus, San Mateo county faces a far more complex landscape than Napa County. Napa County's sheltering strategies primarily reflect inland wildfire and flooding risks, whereas San Mateo County must prepare for conditions shaped by a far more complex and diverse landscape.

Operational Complexity and Partner Scale

Napa County's collaborations with COAD, the Center for Volunteering & Nonprofit Leadership (CVNL), the American Red Cross, and county agencies function effectively at their smaller scale. In San Mateo County, comparable partnerships would involve dozens of organizations, requiring a much larger coordination structure, more robust resource tracking systems, greater consistency monitoring across jurisdictions and expanded volunteer processes. This increased operational complexity emphasized why Napa's model cannot be directly replicated in San Mateo County.

Recommendations for San Mateo County

1. Develop a San Mateo County Specific Care & Shelter Framework

Create a scalable model tailored to San Mateo County's population, jurisdictions, and diversity. Ensure reasonable accommodation for individuals with ADA accessibility needs and prioritize

placing individuals with higher medical needs closer to local hospitals. This approach should be customized for the County rather than directly adopting Napa's plan.

2. Expand Regional and City Level Coordination Structures

Develop standardized yet flexible protocols that can be implemented across all 23 jurisdictions, allowing for local adaptation based on population size, community needs, and geographic differences. While each jurisdiction will require customized approaches, overall coordination can be streamlined and strengthened through the San Mateo County Department of Emergency Management.

3. Invest in AFN-Centered Planning

Develop expanded FAST teams to ensure that evacuation centers and shelters are accessible for older adults, medically frail individuals and fully ADA compliant. These teams should include staff who can assess functional levels, maintain medical support, and leverage dedicated clinical partnerships with local health care providers.

4. Create a Countywide Training System Built for Scale

Create a countywide training system built for scale, using Napa's curriculum as a foundational model while expanding it to support thousands of county staff. The system should integrate city specific modules, include hazard specific and coastal emergency scenarios, and incorporate emergency response planning for SFO Airport as well as the San Mateo and Dumbarton bridges.

5. Strengthen Community Partner Networks

Develop a partnership framework capable of supporting large scale, multi-jurisdictional disasters, potentially through a San Mateo County Community Organized Against Disasters (COAD) coalition and an expanded FAST team. This framework should strengthen coordination among public agencies, community-based organizations and healthcare partners. This would establish clear communication channels and ensure rapid resource sharing and deployment during complex emergencies. It is recommended that the Area Agency on Aging develop a stronger collaboration across Community Based Organizations already serving older adults so food, shelter, medication, durable medical equipment, water, and access to medical care is uninterrupted.

6. Modernize Supply and Logistics Systems

Build an automated inventory and deployment model capable of serving a far larger population, with diversified shelter sites and supply hubs throughout San Mateo County. The modernization of inventory and deployment systems should take into consideration geographic challenges when flooding or blocked roads impede transportation to the remote coastal areas of the county.

Conclusion

Napa County is a leader in disaster preparedness and operates a model that is comprehensive, attentive and resource rich. While Napa's system offers valuable best practices, it was designed for a smaller, less diverse environment, and tailored for Napa. Although SMC cannot directly adopt Napa County's Care and Shelter model it is recommended that SMC consider developing a county specific framework *focused for older adults and people with disabilities*, strengthening regional coordination, investing in AFN centered planning, building a scalable training system, expanding community partnerships, evacuation training including assisted living/senior housing facilities and modernizing logistics. San Mateo County can create a resilient adaptable Care and Shelter system that can support its diverse communities during large, multi-jurisdictional disasters. This customized approach ensures that preparedness, response and recovery efforts are both equitable and effective. It would be highly beneficial for San Mateo County disaster workers to partner with Napa County during a natural disaster. Such collaboration would provide valuable hands-on experience and offer deeper insight into the level of planning and coordination required for effective disaster response and implementation.

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