

# **MONTEREY COUNTY'S INITIAL RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

## **SUMMARY**

Monterey County was thrust into the nexus of a world-wide pandemic and was forced to deal with a situation it was not prepared for. Neither was the federal government, nor the California State government. Shutdowns, fear, and the unknown were shared across the world. Citizens were often confused about how they were supposed to protect themselves and their families. In the face of an unknown situation like the onset of the pandemic in 2020, Monterey County, like all other counties in the state, relied on the state's direction.

In its response to the pandemic, County government experienced lapses in planning, execution, and direction in its effort to calm the populace and keep them informed. Information sent out to the public was often confusing when it could be found. Information released through any number of channels was often conflicting and confounding. Some of the officials who were responsible for informing the public were reluctant to present themselves when needed.

An additional factor in getting the message out to the public is that often the public does not like the message, driving them to search elsewhere for information more to their liking. This further fractured the respect required to collectively conquer an event like a pandemic.

The Monterey County Civil Grand Jury (MCCGJ) focused on the crucial first 30-60 days of response. This report calls for the development of a more comprehensive plan for communicating with the diverse population of Monterey County in dire situations like a global pandemic or a natural disaster. Within reason, whatever channels that people are most familiar with should be used to pass along a single unified response from representative agencies.

This report focuses on recommendations to strengthen public information networks across the County. The intent is to ensure that our citizens receive clear, consistent information and guidance during all types of emergencies. MCCGJ also identified the need for additional training of key personnel involved in emergency operations.

## **GLOSSARY**

<b>AMC</b>	Alert Monterey County system
<b>ARPA</b>	American Rescue Plan Act
<b>BOS</b>	(Monterey County) Board of Supervisors
<b>CAO</b>	County Administrative Office
<b>CDC</b>	Centers for Disease Control
<b>CHW</b>	Community Health Worker (in VIDA project)
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.
<b>CPHO</b>	County Public Health Officer
<b>CTF</b>	Cannabis Tax Fund
<b>DPH</b>	(Monterey County) Department of Public Health
<b>DSW</b>	Disaster Service Workers
<b>EMS</b>	Emergency Medical Services
<b>EOC</b>	(Monterey County) Emergency Operations Center
<b>IC</b>	Incident Commander
<b>ICS</b>	Incident Command System
<b>OES</b>	(Monterey County) Office of Emergency Services
<b>PIO</b>	Public Information Officer
<b>PPE</b>	Personal Protective Equipment
<b>SEMS</b>	(California) Standardized Emergency Management System
<b>VIDA</b>	Virus Integrated Distribution of Aid (project)
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization

## **BACKGROUND**

Since the first identified case of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China, the world has been in turmoil dealing with the first major pandemic in over 100 years. As cases spread around the world, the first case of COVID-19 in the United States was detected in nursing homes in Washington state. It rapidly spread to major U.S. cities around the country. For the people of Monterey County, the COVID-19 pandemic was brought home when infected passengers from a cruise ship were quarantined at Asilomar State Park in Pacific Grove.

The overwhelming magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic came into focus when Gov. Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency on March 4, 2020. Since that day, cities and counties throughout the state have responded to the public health threat using all the resources that were developed over time to respond to an infectious disease outbreak.

Unfortunately, it became apparent early in the pandemic that the existing public health tools to combat infectious disease outbreaks were inadequate for this overwhelming situation. The public received conflicting guidance from all levels of government on how to best protect themselves, their families, and their communities. The issue of conflicting guidance persists to this day, after more than two years into the pandemic.

## **METHODOLOGY**

MCCGJ investigated the early days of Monterey County's pandemic response, including an extensive review of documents and reports. MCCGJ also conducted in-depth interviews with relevant County personnel who were intimately involved in the response activities, as well as elected and appointed County officials. The MCCGJ also reviewed relevant State laws and County ordinances to determine the roles and responsibilities of the County in a public health emergency.

## DISCUSSION

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Monterey County relied upon its own website, social media accounts, and local media coverage to communicate with the public regarding the status of the pandemic and public health directives. The website posted County Public Health Officer (CPHO) Orders and updates, as well as other pertinent news and information regarding the pandemic.

### County Public Health Officer and Health Department

On March 4, 2020, the governor issued a declaration of a statewide public health emergency. The CPHO's first "Shelter-in-Place" Order was issued on March 17, 2020. The Order was reissued on April 3, 2020, expanding restrictions, including the closure of all shared public recreational facilities, parks, and picnic areas. Residential and commercial construction was also prohibited, and funerals were limited to 10 people attending.

Additional CPHO Orders were issued April 10<sup>th</sup>, requiring all laboratories conducting COVID-19 testing to report all results to the Health Department. On April 28<sup>th</sup>, further orders were issued requiring face coverings when going out into the public to perform essential activities. The April 28<sup>th</sup> Order also strongly discouraged the use of medical/surgical (N95) masks for widespread use due to severe shortages of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) across the State.

Throughout this time, investigation found no evidence that the issuance of CPHO Orders was coordinated with the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and communicated to the public through the EOC Public Information Officer (PIO).

The County website also posted news and information on March 26<sup>th</sup> announcing Natividad Hospital had established a bilingual hotline to answer COVID-19 questions and was conducting virtual screening of people experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.

On April 23, 2020, the county website posted that Monterey County Behavioral Health announced the creation of a series of free opportunities to build coping and

resilience skills. Monterey County announced the opening of two COVID-19 testing sites in Salinas and Greenfield beginning May 5, 2020.

Subsequently in the first week of May 2020, the CPHO updated the Shelter-In-Place order to ease restrictions on construction, golf courses, nurseries, and drive-in churches, and to allow certain local businesses to begin providing curbside pickup services to customers.

In March 2020, the County Health Department determined that the establishment of a call center was necessary. Department staff were re-assigned from their normal duties and trained to operate the call center.

Approximately six weeks after the initial Shelter-In-Place order was issued, the County Health Department completed a draft “2019 Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Surveillance Plan” to identify the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of health related COVID-19 data essential to planning, implementation, and evaluation of public health practice.

#### Office of Emergency Services (OES) and Emergency Operations Center (EOC)

State agencies and local governments are required to use the state-wide California Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) in responding to disaster events. The primary goal of SEMS is to aid in communication and response by providing a common management system and language. SEMS provides for a five-level emergency response organization, activated as needed, to provide an effective response to multi-agency and multi-jurisdictional emergencies. The basic framework of SEMS incorporates the use of the Incident Command System (ICS), which provides an incident commander (IC) with a clear framework to structure, organize, and manage an emergency.

When a natural/ medical disaster or pandemic occurs in the County, the standard practice is that the County Administrative Officer (CAO) activates the EOC, which operates under the structure and protocols of the ICS. The EOC is staffed with county personnel that have direct knowledge and expertise related to the specific emergency at hand. ICS protocols establish an EOC Public Information Officer (PIO) through which all

communications to the public on the status of the emergency are channeled and disseminated.

Under the ICS protocols for the activation of an EOC, an Incident Commander (IC) is designated to direct the operations of the EOC. The successful operation of an EOC requires the IC to be knowledgeable in a specific emergency and have the authority to act as an IC. A CPHO has the knowledge necessary to assume the role of IC during the pandemic.

This investigation found no evidence that the County Health Department or the CPHO participated in the operation of the EOC as the Incident Commander. Further, this investigation found that information on the pandemic was released to the public from multiple sources and not coordinated through the EOC.

The State of California Health and Safety Code provides each County Health Officer with broad powers and authorities to respond to medical disasters and infectious disease outbreaks. Specifically, Section 101040 (a) states that *“The local health officer may take any preventive measures that may be necessary to protect and preserve the public health from any public health hazard during any “state of emergency” as defined in Section 8558 of the Government Code, within his or her jurisdiction.”*

During an emergency declaration, all County employees are designated as Disaster Service Workers (DSW). Under this designation, County employees can be re-assigned to duties that are required in response to the emergency. It was reported that various County departments did not comply with DSW requests from the Office of Emergency Services (OES) to provide staffing to the EOC. Additionally, it was reported that some county staff that were assigned to fulfill positions in the EOC had received little or no training in ICS.

### Notifying the Public

When Monterey County activated the EOC in response to the pandemic, the decision was made **not** to use the existing Alert Monterey County (AMC) system to communicate public health information to County residents and businesses. The reasoning behind the decision is the AMC system is a subscriber-based service that

requires individuals to proactively sign up to receive the alerts and the current subscriber base does not include a considerable proportion of the county population.

The AMC system has the capability to reach every County resident with a wireless telephone, landline, or computer, and the messaging can be sent in either English or Spanish. Additionally, messages can be targeted by neighborhood, city, or geographic area based on physical address. The 2014-15 MCCGJ issued a report stating that the county had not allocated sufficient resources or effort to effectively register county residents in the AMC system.

MCCGJ also noted that the County COVID-19 briefings did not include a person trained in American sign language to communicate with hearing-impaired residents. It was also recognized during the initial pandemic response that the County did not have adequate access to certified Spanish language translators for dissemination of Spanish language COVID-19 public information.

The role of informing the public involves a Public Information Officer (PIO) in each county department. When the pandemic began, the Monterey County PIO position, the voice for the Board of Supervisors (BoS), was vacant and there was no staffing provided for the PIO Office. The EOC had a PIO, but no support staff. The County Health Department had a PIO and assigned staffing, as did each hospital in the county. Consequently, the COVID-19 public messaging was not coordinated nor consistent across the county government. In early 2022, the BoS decided to fund the position of County PIO and support staffing for the office.

### Hospitals

Early in the pandemic it was acknowledged that alternative patient overflow sites needed to be established and staffed by hospital workers when all the County hospitals were overwhelmed and unable to provide necessary treatment. The County also hired a former Monterey County CAO to negotiate an agreement among the various hospitals in the county to provide the necessary staffing for the identified alternate sites. MCCGJ's investigation could not find evidence that any agreement was reached with the hospitals for staffing the patient overflow sites.

MCCGJ investigation found that the non-profit Clinica de Salud provided valuable resources in outreach to agricultural workers throughout Monterey County, offering bilingual COVID-19 information, public education on the County “Shelter-In-Place” Orders, and initial COVID-19 testing and tracking of positive cases in the agricultural worker population.

### County Actions

The BoS directed approximately \$16 - \$18 million from the Cannabis Tax Fund (CTF) to support the various COVID-19 pandemic response activities in fiscal years 2019-20 and 2020-21. The County was fortunate to have the cannabis tax revenue available to support the COVID-19 pandemic response activities. The cannabis tax revenue collected by the County is subject to fluctuations in cannabis market conditions. Consequently, reliance on this revenue source for future emergency response activities could be problematic for the County.

MCCGJ recognizes that the County eventually implemented effective measures to address some of the communication and outreach issues that plagued the County’s initial response. The BoS hired the consultant TMD Enterprises to improve the consistency and coordination of COVID-19 public information, which included reaching the diverse population in their languages throughout the County. The contract was approved in late June 2020.

When community groups recognized the lack of outreach to vulnerable, at-risk populations in the county they turned to the Monterey Community Foundation to help address the problem. The result was the creation of the Virus Integrated Distribution of Aid (VIDA) project which launched the Community Health Worker (CHW) program. Subsequently, in December 2020, the BoS directed \$4.9 million in federal funds from American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to fund the CHW program. The program goal was to provide outreach, education, and support to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and promote full recovery through ensuring adequate isolation and quarantine. VIDA began setting up the program in January 2021, nine months after the declaration of the pandemic. VIDA would go on to become a nationally recognized program for its outreach success.



However, as stated in the MCCGJ findings and recommendation of this investigation, significant structural issues with the County’s pandemic response persist today, more than two years into the pandemic.

## **FINDINGS**

- F1** Monterey County does not have a Pandemic Response Plan that focuses on processes and procedures for addressing the public health needs of the public during a pandemic.
- F2** The Monterey County Health Department’s “Pandemic Influenza Plan” (last updated June 11, 2013) does not address how the Health Department would continue to provide essential county services to Monterey County during a pandemic crisis.
- F3** Monterey County did not use the existing AMC system to communicate public health information to the Monterey County residents and businesses subscribing to the service.
- F4** Monterey County’s EOC did not have sufficient certified speakers or translators to provide accurate and timely communication or messaging to the non-English speaking population in the County.
- F5** The County Health Department did not acknowledge its lead role and responsibilities as Incident Commander in the County EOC during a public health emergency.
- F6** The County Health Officer did not appear to use the full authority of his office to command and direct the County response to COVID-19 in Monterey County.
- F7** Monterey County did not follow the unified chain of command protocols of SEMS and ICS to communicate pandemic information to the public.
- F8** The County’s communications to the public did not address the needs of the hearing-impaired residents in Monterey County.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- R1** The County use the AMC system to communicate public health emergency information to County residents by Dec. 31, 2022.

- R2** The County implement a public service campaign to significantly increase the number of County residents signed up for the AMC system by Dec. 31, 2022.
- R3** The County Health Officer and Health Department management staff receive SEMS and ICS training to provide the requisite education on the roles and responsibilities of the Health Department during medical disaster or pandemic incidents by Dec. 31, 2022.
- R4** All County personnel that are assigned to fulfill duties in the EOC must be trained in SEMS and ICS by Dec. 31, 2022.
- R5** Monterey County develop an Infectious Disease Response Plan that addresses the health and safety requirements of county residents during infectious disease outbreaks by June 30, 2023.
- R6** The County adopt the SEMS and ICS protocols for communicating public health emergency information to the public during an ongoing incident by Dec. 31, 2022.
- R7** Public communications during an emergency incident address effective communication with the hearing impaired and non-English speaking County residents by Sept. 1, 2022.
- R8** The CAO clarify the authority and responsibilities of the Health Department and Health Officer under State Law in responding to medical disaster or infectious disease outbreaks and memorialize them in emergency response plans by Dec. 31, 2022.
- R9** The County enter Memorandums of Understanding with all hospital systems in Monterey County to establish the terms and conditions for cooperation and resource allocation during a designated countywide medical disaster or infectious disease outbreak by Jun. 30, 2023.

## **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

Pursuant to Penal Code (Sect) 933 and 933.05, the Civil Grand Jury requests response from the following governing body:

- Monterey County Board of Supervisors  
Findings: F1-F8  
Recommendations: R1-R9

## **INVITED RESPONSE**

- Monterey County Office of Emergency Services  
Findings: F2-F7  
Recommendations: R1-R2, R5-R6

- Monterey County Department of Health/Public Health Office  
Findings: F1, F3-F8  
Recommendations: R3-R7
- County Administrative Officer  
Findings: F8,  
Recommendations: R8-R9

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- (1) 2019 Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Surveillance Plan (Drafted April 25, 2020)
- (2) County of Monterey COVID-19 Media Page Website
- (3) County of Monterey Health Department “Departmental Pandemic Influenza Plan (June 11, 2013)
- (4) County of Monterey Classification Specifications Health Officer. (February 2000)
- (5) County of Monterey Health Department FAQ’s (March 20, 2020)
- (6) Emergency Management during Global Health Crisis, Kelsey Scanlon  
Monterey County Health Department “Disaster Medical Operations Plan”  
November 2019
- (7) Monterey County Health Department Organization Chart (12.2.2021)
- (8) Monterey County Health Department Emergency Operations Plan (Basic Plan)  
February 13, 2018
- (9) Monterey County Public Health Officer (Dr. Moreno) Shelter-in-Place order, Lab testing, take-out food, etc.)
- (10) Monterey County Board of Supervisors Board Report November 16,2021 “The PHO continues to recommend social distancing measures for meetings of the legislative bodies.”
- (11) Monterey County Emergency Response Manual and COVID-19 Prevention Program March 2020
- (12) Monterey County Situation Report (7.9.21 COVID-19 Website (en Español)
- (13) Monterey County Civil Grand Jury Report 2007 “OES EVALUATION”
- (14) Press Releases from Monterey County Health Department (3.20.2020 onward)
- (15) Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury 2020-2021 Consolidated Final Report “Virtual Reality in the Year of the Pandemic”
- (16) Statutory Authority of the County Health Officer (California Legislative Information)
- (17) Tetra Tech “After Action” Report on EOC Covid 19 Pandemic Activation, including input from CAO Budget Office, County Counsel, Department of Social Services, Department of Health, Sheriff/Coroner, covering Economic Development; Administration; Health and Human Services; Infrastructure and Public Safety.
- (18) TMD Creative County of Monterey COVID-19 Scope of Work Retainer Agreement (June 2020), adopted March 26, 2022
- (19) [https://www.co.monterey.ca.us/government/departments-a-h/administrative-office-of-emergency-services/response/COVID-19.](https://www.co.monterey.ca.us/government/departments-a-h/administrative-office-of-emergency-services/response/COVID-19)  
<https://www.santacruzhealth.org/HSAHome/HSADivisions/PublicHealth/CommunicableDiseaseControl/CoronavirusHome.aspx>

## **APPENDICES**

**Appendix A -** Early Pandemic Timeline

**Appendix B -** State Pandemic Timeline

## APPENDIX A: Early Pandemic Timeline:

December 21, 2019 -	first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China
January 21, 2020 -	first confirmed US case in Washington State
January 26, 2020 -	first confirmed case in California
January 30, 2020 -	WHO (World Health Organization) declares public health emergency of international concern.
February 4, 2020 -	USA declares public health emergency, travel restrictions put in place.
February 28, 2020 -	first case of community spread in California
March 2, 2020 -	Monterey County EOC (Emergency Operations Center) activates lowest level (3) three).
March 3, 2020 -	Monterey County Health Department DOC (Department Operations Center) activated
March 4, 2020 -	First COVID-19 death in California
March 4, 2020 -	Governor Newsom declares state emergency.
March 6, 2020 -	DPH (Department of Public Health) begins testing for COVID-19.
March 10, 2020 -	Board of Supervisors approves County Emergency declared on March 6, 2020
March 11, 2020 -	WHO (World Health Organization) declares Pandemic for COVID-19.
March 12, 2020 -	Governor Newsom issues Executive Order E0-N-25-20: "All residents heed any orders and guidance of state and local public health officials, including but not limited to the imposition of social distancing measures, to control the spread of COVID-19."
March 13, 2020 -	President Trump declares a National Emergency
March 13, 2020 -	12 Diamond Princess Cruise Ship passengers quarantined in Asilomar Hotel, Pacific Grove while undergoing testing.
March 13, 2020 -	Cities of Seaside, Marina, Monterey, Carmel, and Pacific Grove proclaim local emergencies.
March 16, 2020 -	Monterey County schools and libraries close per Governor Newsom's Executive Order.
March 16, 2020 -	Cities of Del Rey Oaks, Gonzales, Greenfield, King City and Soledad declares local emergencies.
March 17, 2020 -	Counties of Marin, Contra Costa, Alameda, Santa Clara, San Mateo, Santa Cruz, and San Francisco order "Shelter-in-Place" beginning March 18, 2020.
March 17, 2020 -	First two confirmed COVID-19 cases in Monterey County
March 17, 2020 -	Monterey County Public Health Officer, Dr. Moreno, issues "Shelter-in-Place" order.

March 17, 2020 -	City of Salinas, and Sand City proclaim the existence of a local emergency.
March 18, 2020 -	Monterey County Jail Visitation suspended.
March 18, 2020 -	EOC elevates action to Level (2) Two.
March 19, 2020 -	Governor Newsom issues Stay-At-Home order for the entire state.
March 21, 2020 -	First County death due to complications of COVID-19.
April 1, 2020 -	State Public Health releases "Face Coverings Guidance"
April 3, 2020 -	Public Health Officer amended original "Shelter-in-Place."
April 6, 2020 -	EOC elevates to Level I.
April 14, 2020 -	Monterey County Op Area EOC Announces Alternate Care and Alternate Housing Sites.
April 24, 2020 -	Monterey County Health Officer Issues Short Term Lodging Order.
May 8, 2020 -	Supplement to Shelter in Place Order issued, allowing local retail businesses to provide curbside pick-up service to customers. May 11, 2020 - Community Testing Sites are now open to the public.
May 19, 2020 -	Monterey County Road to Recovery released, charting the county's progress toward reopening.

## **APPENDIX B**

The CAL OES State Operations Center (SOC) activated 03.20.20 at 0700 hours in support of the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Medical Health Coordination Center's (MHCC) statewide response to COVID-1119. Cal OES will continue to provide resource coordination for the COVID-10 event, as well as situation status reporting and advance planning across multiple areas.

### **Situations Overview:**

#### California State of Emergency Proclamation 03.04.20

Governor Newsom declared an Emergency for California, because of the global COVID-19 outbreak that began in December 2019, to make additional resources available, formalize emergency actions already underway across multiple state agencies and departments, and help the state prepare for broader spread of COVID-19.

#### Executive Order N-33-20 3.19.20

The California Public Health Officer and Director of the California Department of Public Health ordered all individuals living in the State of California to stay home or at their place of residence, except as needed to maintain Continuity of Operations of the Federal critical infrastructure sectors.

#### Global Health Advisory 3.19.20

The Department of State issued a Global Health Advisor at Level 4 (Do not travel) due to the global impact of COVID-19.

#### FEMA-4482-DR-CA 3.20.20

President Trump approved Major Declarations FEMA-4482-DR-CA (DR-4482) for the COVID-19 Pandemic

#### CONFIRMED Global COVID-19 Cases (per Worldometers COVID-19 Live Updates)

08.18.20 at 1000 hours:



Total Confirmed Cases in 213 countries: 22,173,219

Total Deaths: 779,976

Total Confirmed United States COVID-19 cases (per CDC): 5,422,242

Total US Deaths: 169,870

Total Confirmed COVID-19 Cases in California (per Medical Health Coordination and Prevention at CDC) 632,667