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BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

County Administration Building

105 East Anapamu Street

Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Telephone: (805) 568-2190

www.countyofsb.org

COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

May 20, 2025

Honorable Patricia Kelly
Presiding Judge
Santa Barbara Superior Court
County Courthouse
1100 Anacapa Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Reference: Response to Santa Barbara Civil Grand Jury report titled, "Is the Santa Barbara Public Health Department Prepared for the Next Epidemic?"

Judge Kelly:

Please find attached the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors (Board) response to the above referenced Civil Grand Jury Report. As directed by the Grand Jury, all responses are provided in accordance with Section 933.05 of the California Penal Code (PC). Pursuant to PC Section 933 (c) and (d), responses are provided on behalf of the Board of Supervisors.

Sincerely,

Laura Capps, Chair
Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors

cc: Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors
Response to the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury 2024-25 Report
“Is the Santa Barbara Public Health Department Prepared for the Next Epidemic?”

The County of Santa Barbara Health Department (County Health) acknowledges the investigation conducted by the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury in its 2024-2025 report titled “Is the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department Prepared for the Next Epidemic?” County Health remains committed to protecting the community from infectious disease threats and preparing for future epidemics and pandemics. County Health appreciates the findings and recommendations provided by the Grand Jury and is dedicated to enhancing epidemic preparedness.

County Health recognizes the impact that infectious disease has on individuals and communities and this response reflects our ongoing efforts to remain prepared for the next epidemic. This document details the response to each finding and recommendation made by the Grand Jury. These responses include acknowledgements of areas needing improvement, explanations of current practices, and outlines processes already in place or planned for implementation.

Through continued collaboration with local, State, and federal partners, and commitment to improving infectious disease prevention and epidemic/pandemic preparedness, County Health aims to improve the health of our communities.

Finding 1

The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department has not developed proactive pathogen specific risk assessments based upon evidence-based risk analysis.

The Board of Supervisors partially disagrees.

County Health proactively monitors global, national, and statewide viral variants for trends, risks, and mutations that could increase the potential for epidemics, and has developed pathogen-specific monitoring and response procedures for known pathogens with high-epidemic risk, such as Pertussis, Anthrax, Measles, and Hepatitis A, as examples. County Health coordinates closely with the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) on emerging threats, and has access to multiple disease surveillance datasets, including model-based projections of current and emerging respiratory virus spread in California. While disease risk profiles of pathogens may change rapidly due to mutations and new variants, County Health acknowledges and recognizes that implementation of additional disease software and syndromic surveillance tools locally may provide more robust information regarding risk assessment and the early detection of possible epidemic threats in Santa Barbara County.

Recommendation 1

The Board of Supervisors require the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department to perform ongoing evidence-based assessments to determine the potential pathogens that pose the highest risk in Santa Barbara County. Risk assessments should be updated every three months, or more frequently if new threats are identified. To be implemented by September 1, 2025.

This recommendation has been implemented.

As indicated, County Health has an existing process of continuing disease risk assessment through various surveillance tools, and weekly meetings with local, State, and federal partners to determine the potential pathogens that pose a risk in Santa Barbara County based on evidence available. County Health receives biweekly updates from the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) on emerging threats as well as access to multiple disease surveillance datasets and dashboards, including model-based projections of current and emerging respiratory viruses spread across California (i.e. “NowCasts” prepared by the State’s *Communicable Diseases Assessment Tool*, or CalCAT). The County Health Officer also participates in weekly “California Pathogen Genomics” meetings with Theiagen Genomics, a company specializing in genomic variant identification and the epidemiology of viral pathogens of concern. Additionally, the County Health Officer participates in monthly meetings of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), where local, regional and national trends of concerning pathogen activities are routinely reviewed and recommendations shared.

As a result of ongoing evidence-based assessments to determine local disease threats, County Health has developed standardized policies and procedures for monitoring and responding to known pathogens that pose a risk to Santa Barbara County, including Pertussis, Anthrax, Measles, and Hepatitis A, as examples. Risk assessments are reviewed at least monthly, or as new threats are identified.

Finding 2

The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department has not developed proactive pathogen specific disaster plans based upon evidence-based risk analysis.

The Board of Supervisors partially disagrees.

As a best practice for ongoing epidemic response planning, County Health has cataloged known pathogen-specific diseases, and has implemented a countywide Infectious Disease Emergency Response Plan, dated June 2024 (See Attachment C). This disease response planning effort is a proactive strategy to effectively respond to both known, and unknown (or emerging), disease pathogens based on general routes of transmission (such as airborne,

person-to-person contact, bloodborne, sexually-transmitted, vector-borne or food and water transmission, as examples).

County Health finds that it is often infeasible to develop pathogen-specific disaster plans due to the continually changing risk profiles of pathogens and the rapid pace of viral mutations into new variants that can quickly emerge as a disease threat. In response to this ever-changing landscape of pathogen threats, the County's Infectious Disease Emergency Response Plan includes a tiered response to potential epidemics utilizing an evidence-based risk analysis for known pathogens of concern. Disaster planning for specific pathogens is conducted where feasible; and County Health continues to improve response plans, policies, and procedures based on disease transmission routes, severity, and likely impact.

Recommendation 2

The Board of Supervisors require the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department to develop disaster plans specific to each of the pathogens identified by risk assessment to be at highest risk of causing an epidemic. Disaster plans should be updated every three months, or more frequently if new threats are identified. To be implemented by September 1, 2025.

This recommendation will not be implemented.

County Health recognizes and acknowledges that importance of a proactive strategy to help ensure that Santa Barbara County is prepared to respond swiftly and effectively to future epidemic threats. Where feasible, County Health has adopted and regularly reviews (at least annually) specific disaster plans responding to the following risks: Foodborne Illness Plan (specific for enteric pathogens), Pandemic Influenza Plan (specific for novel, influenza pathogens), Infectious Disease Emergency Response (IDER) Plan (which is intentionally flexible and scalable to meet the needs for multiple pathogens based on routes of transmission), Mass-Dispensing Plan (tactical plan for mass-vaccination, mass-prophylaxis, and mass-testing), and a Continuity of Operations (COOP) Plan that ensures sustainable operations of County Health during a disaster or disease outbreak.

Of these disaster plans, the IDER Plan is the broadest and includes a tiered public health response that plans for the deployment of prevention resources, recognizing that an outbreak can occur at any time, with varying severity, requiring an immediate response when early detection signals are identified in the community. An infectious disease response plan that can accommodate a rapid response to a variety of pathogens (known or unknown), considering disease type, disease severity, and mode of transmission has been determined by County Health to be most effective for disaster response planning and local resource management.

Finding 3

The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department has not employed current, more comprehensive software for the early detection of potential epidemic risks.

The Board of Supervisors partially disagrees.

County Health currently utilizes a variety of disease surveillance tools for monitoring circulating diseases; however, more comprehensive software for the early detection of potential epidemic risks would benefit Santa Barbara County residents and further consideration of available technological tools is ongoing. Existing surveillance tools employed by County Health are used with varying frequency, ranging from daily to monthly to as needed, but routinely assist County Health with potential epidemic risks by comparing local disease reporting data to epidemic triggering benchmarks and thresholds.

Recommendation 3

The Board of Supervisors require the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department to identify, acquire, and implement current, more comprehensive software for the early detection of potential epidemic risks. To be implemented by December 1, 2025.

This recommendation will be implemented.

County Health recognizes and acknowledges the importance of early detection of potential epidemic risks so that public health interventions and protective measures can be quickly communicated with residents of Santa Barbara County to mitigate community impacts. County Health is currently in the process of enrolling in the Center for Disease Control's National Syndromic Surveillance Program (NSSP) system, which includes both the ESSENCE and Bio Sense tools referenced in the Grand Jury's report. Syndromic surveillance allows for real-time collection of clinical data from healthcare entities and emergency departments. Data includes patient-reported illness symptoms, confirmed diagnosis in patient, demographic data of patient, and other details on respiratory, gastrointestinal, and neurological symptoms that may give an early indication of an emerging outbreak. Final onboarding to the NSSP program is expected to be finalized prior to December 1, 2025.

Finding 4

The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department has the obligation to ensure wastewater testing is carried out throughout Santa Barbara County but is not currently fulfilling its responsibility.

The Board of Supervisors disagrees.

County Health actively encourages wastewater service providers to participate in disease testing surveillance programs that are available through the California State Department of Public Health (i.e. Cal-SuWers Program). As indicated in the Grand Jury report, wastewater epidemic testing is a useful sentinel surveillance tool for the determination of epidemic risks and community prevalence of disease transmission, as evidenced nationally during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, limitations to its utilization as an augmentation tool in determining epidemic risk locally should also be acknowledged. Wastewater testing for viruses is limited only to known pathogens that may be shed in human feces (i.e. SARS-CoV-2, influenza (flu), poliovirus, and monkeypox), not all infected individuals shed virus in their feces, the sample results do not indicate whether individuals have new or residual infection, results provide only community-based information that cannot distinguish the location of early outbreaks for public health mitigation efforts, and current sequencing platforms for virus testing in wastewater are not available locally in Santa Barbara County. Ongoing costs to wastewater utilities to collect on-site samples, prepare and ship samples, and for the laboratory analysis is often a consideration for wastewater providers to participate in wastewater surveillance testing programs.

Under existing State laws, County Health's authority and responsibility to protect the public from sewage spills that may directly impact individuals should not be conflated with being able to also require surveillance testing for the presence of other viruses that may be shed in wastewater, but that pose no direct disease risk to populations when discharged to waters of the State. Wastewater service providers are currently regulated through the California State Water Resources Control Board pursuant to the State regulations, and perform wastewater testing as may be required by their discharge permits rather than for purposes of epidemic surveillance.

Recommendation 4

The Board of Supervisors require the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department to ensure that sufficient wastewater testing sites are operational in Santa Barbara County, to include at least the major population centers. To be implemented by September 1, 2025.

This recommendation will not be implemented.

As indicated, County Health does not have legal authority to require or mandate wastewater testing by local city jurisdictions or wastewater utilities for disease surveillance during non-emergency circumstances. However, County Health does monitor trends in wastewater testing through weekly reports received from the State from participating local jurisdictions. During a declared local health emergency, the County Health Officer will evaluate whether an order for wastewater utilities to conduct additional wastewater

surveillance testing is necessary to monitor disease transmission, where technologically and scientifically feasible.

Finding 5

Even though bioterrorism is a growing threat, Santa Barbara County has not established effective channels of communication with federal, regional, and other stakeholders to learn of and apply threat assessment at the local level.

The Board of Supervisors disagrees.

A process for identification and communication of threats, bioterrorism or otherwise, within Santa Barbara County is well-established. This process includes the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Office (SBSO) participating as a member of the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) in conjunction with regional, State, and federal agencies. In the event a threat is identified, the SBSO would take the lead and coordinate needed actions, with County Health responding as needed based on the specific threat. Due to the nature of investigations and the work of the JTTF, information received by County Health will dictate a response using established processes identified within the Infection Disease Emergency Response (IDER) Plan and/or Mass Casualty Incident Response Plan.

Recommendation 5

The Board of Supervisors require the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department to seek to institute regular communication with relevant federal agencies, including Vandenberg Space Force Base, regarding the current threat of bioterrorism, and incorporate this information into risk analysis and disaster planning. To be implemented by September 1, 2025.

This recommendation will not be implemented.

As stated, County Health is not the lead authority in responding to bioterrorism, but is engaged as needed as part of the incident command and the Office of Emergency Management through established protocols and processes. County Health does take advantage of all available opportunities to communicate and collaborate with federal, State, and local partners through Operational Area emergency management meetings, the Joint Regional Intelligence Center (JRIC), and the annual United States Postal Service (USPS) Bio-Defense System (BDS) training and exercise. County Health, however, does not have independent authority to institute regular communications with federal partners, such as Vandenberg Space Force Base.

Finding 6

The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department has not established a process to assure effective communication between regional healthcare providers regarding local epidemic risks.

The Board of Supervisors partially disagrees.

Local epidemic risks are routinely reviewed by County Health staff and leaders. When an elevated local epidemic risk is identified, County Health leaders are notified and this information is communicated directly with regional healthcare providers by fax or email as a health alert, informational broadcast, or press release via its Public Health Broadcast System. However, the County Health Department acknowledges that there is room for improvement and has initiated the development and implementation of policies and procedures to ensure local epidemic risks and prevention tools are clearly communicated in a standardized and routine fashion to healthcare providers, community leaders, and the residents of Santa Barbara County.

Recommendation 6a

The Board of Supervisors require the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department to establish a community task force for epidemic preparedness by instituting regular meetings and inviting participation by health care providers within Santa Barbara County, as well as public health representatives from surrounding counties, the county jails, Vandenberg Space Force Base, and the Federal Correctional Complex, Lompoc. To be implemented by September 1, 2025.

This recommendation will be implemented.

County Health recognizes and acknowledges that regular communication among local health care providers and regional public health representatives is an important component of effective epidemic preparedness. During the COVID-19 pandemic, County Health initiated monthly meeting of local physicians, the UCSB virology lab and infectious disease specialists in the County to review evolving new variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the potential risks for spread of disease and severity of disease.

This forum has since been expanded to a community-wide task force for epidemic preparedness. The “Countywide Infectious Disease Task Team” meets quarterly and is comprised of local epidemic preparedness partners, such as infectious disease physicians representing each hospital in Santa Barbara County, the County Health Officer, County Health’s disease control manager and epidemiologists, representatives from the Ventura County Medical Center, Vandenberg Space Force Base, and institutes of higher education in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties (i.e. Westmont College, UCSB, and Cal-Poly). In response to the recommendation, County Health is exploring a formal structure

and expanding membership for this group, which we expect to be completed prior to September 1, 2025.

Recommendation 6b

The Board of Supervisors require the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department to ensure that the recommendations of the community task force be documented, shared, and acted upon by responsible entities within Santa Barbara County. To be implemented by September 1, 2025.

This recommendation will not be implemented.

County Health recognizes and acknowledges the importance of information sharing and community coordination in developing a more proactive approach to emerging public health risks. The Countywide Infectious Disease Task Force is such a community partnership for local information sharing, and it serves to advise County Health for coordination of preparedness and response activities if there are early detection warnings of new infections in the community. Health recommendations, disease surveillance data, and feedback from health professional partners are shared at these regular meetings. In response to recommendations, the County Health Officer retains the responsibility in State law to advise the Board of Supervisors and the public to take necessary protective actions when they may be warranted. As the community task force is not a legislative or appointed advisory body, the County Health Officer will continue to serve in this capacity, and may enact preventative measures or protective steps against the spread of diseases as recommended or in the event of a local health emergency.