

Response to 2025 Grand Jury Report

County Executive Office &
County Health Department

Is the Santa Barbara Public Health
Department Prepared for the Next
Epidemic?



Summary

- On March 10, 2025, the 2024-25 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury distributed a report titled “Is the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department Prepared for the Next Epidemic?”
- The report focused on the County's readiness for an epidemic response and identified areas where a proactive approach to preparedness must be adopted.
- The report lists six findings and recommendation in three categories; Assessment and Response, Bioterrorism and Communication.
- The Board of Supervisors is required to respond to the Grand Jury reports in writing within 90 days and is responsible for responding to Findings and Recommendations listed in the report.
- As the Grand Jury's report acknowledges, it is the County Health Department’s responsibility to plan for and respond to infectious epidemics that might occur in Santa Barbara County.

Background

- County Health is committed to protecting public health, which includes planning for, preventing, and managing outbreaks of infectious diseases, and works collaboratively and diligently in ensuring that readiness and response plans are in place.
- County Health is actively involved in disease surveillance and monitoring using tools and data sources that compare local incidence rates to epidemic thresholds and other benchmarks as well as to other counties and regions nationwide.
- County Health receives regular risk information from state and national groups. This information is assessed by epidemiologists and is shared with stakeholders and the “Infectious Disease Taskforce”.
- County Health’s Public Health Emergency Preparedness staff (PHEP) plans, manages and coordinates trainings and responses to threats and epidemics.

Risk Assessment and Response

Findings 1, 2, 3 and 4



Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1: *The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department has not developed proactive pathogen specific risk assessments based upon evidence-based risk analysis.*

Partially Disagree – County Health proactively monitors global, national and statewide trends that could potentially indicate a threat of epidemics. County Health coordinates closely with the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) on emerging threats, and has access to multiple disease surveillance datasets; but recognizes implementation of additional syndromic surveillance tools 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.*

Has been Implemented – 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. 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.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 2: *The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department has not developed proactive pathogen specific disaster plans based upon evidence-based risk analysis.*

Partially Disagree - As a best practice for ongoing epidemic response planning, County Health has implemented a countywide Infectious Disease Emergency Response Plan (IDER), dated June 2024. 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.

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.*

Will not be implemented – County Health recognizes and acknowledges the 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. 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.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 3: *The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department has not employed current, more comprehensive software for the early detection of potential epidemic risks.*

Partially Disagree - 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.

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.*

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. Final onboarding to the NSSP program is expected to be finalized prior to December 1, 2025.

Findings and Recommendations

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.*

Disagree - Wastewater service providers are currently regulated through the California State Water Resources Control Board pursuant to State regulations. There is no legal authority requiring or mandating the Health Officer to independently execute these powers in non-emergency circumstances. However, 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.

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.*

Will not be Implemented - 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 through weekly reports received by 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 surveillance testing is necessary to monitor disease transmission, where technologically and scientifically feasible.

Bioterrorism

Finding 5



Findings and Recommendations

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.*

Disagree - A process for identification and communication of threats of bioterrorism within the County is well established through a Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) that includes the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Office in conjunction with regional, State, and federal agencies.

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.*

Will not be Implemented - 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 and the Joint Regional Intelligence Center.

Communication

Finding 6



Findings and Recommendations

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.*

Disagree Partially - 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. The County Health Department acknowledges that there is room for improvement and has initiated the development and implementation of communication 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.*

Will be Implemented - During the COVID-19 pandemic, County Health initiated a monthly meeting with 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 and become the “Countywide Infectious Disease Task Team”, which meets quarterly and is comprised of local epidemic preparedness partners.

Findings and Recommendations

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.*

Will not be Implemented - The Countywide Infectious Disease Task Force is 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. However, 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 warranted.

Recommended Actions

- a) Consider and adopt the responses in Attachment A as the Board of Supervisors' response to the 2024-25 Grand Jury report entitled "Is the Santa Barbara Public Health Department Prepared for the Next Epidemic?";
- b) Authorize the Chair to sign the letter included in Attachment A, and forward the letter and responses to the Presiding Judge of Santa Barbara County Superior Court; and
- c) Determine pursuant to CEQA Guidelines 15378(b)(5) that the above actions are not a project subject to CEQA review, because they are government administrative activities that do not result in direct or indirect physical changes to the environment.



Questions?