

L.A. not ready for disaster

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With multiple levels of bureaucracy and outdated emergency plans, the city of Los Angeles is not as prepared as it should be in the event of a major disaster, according to an audit released Monday. While police, fire and other individual departments have good plans to respond to large-scale emergencies such as an earthquake or terrorist attack, L.A. lacks an overarching strategy on how to manage a crisis.

"I do not want the public to be afraid," said Controller Laura Chick, who ordered the audit. "But I want the public to know that the city of Los Angeles is not as well-prepared for a widespread disaster as we need to be and as we can be."

As the nation's second-largest city, Los Angeles is a possible target for terrorism. It is also at risk for natural disasters, including earthquakes, major wildfires and tsunamis. In recent years, leaders have also begun to plan for the possibility of a pandemic flu outbreak. Los Angeles won accolades in a 2006 national survey for being one of the most prepared cities for a major emergency - although officials said that was more a reflection on the widespread lack of preparation by most other cities. L.A.'s response to wildfires also has been recognized as a model of cooperation with other agencies. But the audit found that many of its emergency plans are outdated and its training exercises are not well-coordinated.

Auditors reviewed 26 departmental plans and found that 16 of those haven't been updated in the past three years. One departmental plan - the chief legislative analyst's - had not been updated since 1993. When the city does stage mock emergencies to test its preparedness, there is poor tracking and follow-up to make sure flaws are corrected. "The audit found that emergency plans are outdated and incomplete; training is not approached strategically; correction actions go unresolved for long periods; and collaboration with other government, private and nonprofit entities needs strengthening," auditors wrote. The city also does not have formal agreements with the Red Cross and other nonprofits detailing who will be responsible for what actions during an emergency.

"We are not good at preparing for what-ifs," Chick said. "We have not been paying attention to this in the full way we need to."

Mayor must take lead

Better emergency preparedness also shouldn't take more money or resources, the controller added. But it will take leadership by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to empower the Emergency Management Department to play a larger role in citywide planning, and to prepare annual updates of an emergency preparedness strategic plan. Villaraigosa's office said his staff has been working with the Emergency Management Department in recent weeks to develop a package of ordinances to address the issues raised in the audit.

"The proposals will embrace many of the controller's recommendations," said Jonathan Powell, spokesman for the mayor. Currently, the city has a convoluted emergency operations management structure. There is an Emergency Operations Board, chaired by the chief of police,

that is responsible for supervising and managing an emergency. The city currently assigns a total dedicated staff of nearly 88 full-time positions for emergency preparedness and disaster planning within the 12 direct service departments, costing nearly \$10.9 million in annual salaries and benefits. But during a crisis, the Los Angeles Fire Department and Emergency Management Department will play an equally large role. The audit recommends creating an executive committee with the police chief, fire chief and EMD general manager. "We have multiple leaders and multiple pieces ... The Emergency Management Department needs to be elevated and given a stronger role, and in many ways be the leader on this," Chick said.

Plans inconsistent

The audit also found there is no up-to-date or complete inventory of all of the city's emergency plans and the content of such plans is not consistent or high-quality in all cases. Jim Featherstone, general manager of the EMD, said he agrees with many of the audit findings and has been working to improve citywide coordination since he took over the department in October.

He has been positioning the department as the leader and coordinator of citywide emergency preparedness and response. "We're doing a paradigm shift," Featherstone said. "We're trying to get all the city departments working collaboratively. "We know there is no one department that can see the city through a catastrophe or crisis