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AWAITING THE BIG ONE

Earthquake preparedness just makes family sense

By Craig Reem

Orange County's sheriff suggested recently that the region's businesses be prepared for three days on their own. However, most business types at a breakfast in which he spoke didn't raise their hands when asked if their workplace has the proper emergency provisions in the case of a disaster such as an earthquake. OC Family Magazine suggests that families be prepared for five days on their own, and this report will be a checklist on how to go about that.

Sheriff Mike Carona spoke about being ready for the inevitable during a disaster-preparedness meeting of the minds. The entire Southern California region is at risk of a natural disaster, particularly an earthquake that could upend the lives of this region's 23 million residents.

ReadyOC and the American Red Cross presented the event; sponsors included Churm Media, which publishes OC Family Magazine.

Guest speaker Lucy Jones of the U.S. Geological Survey, who studies the probability of California earthquakes, made her point clearly: "I don't say if the Big One happens, but when the Big One happens." (For more information on Southern California, go to: earthquakecountry.info/roots/roots.html)

While the famed San Andreas Fault is top of the news, a southern section of it running from the Salton Sea through the city of San Bernardino is of particular concern. No action has occurred in this particular stretch for 300 years, she says, when the norm should be no more than 150 years. While earthquakes cannot be predicted, she says one at this point is likely to occur in the lifetime of some of the breakfast attendees. A major quake along this section would disrupt, and perhaps disable, major regional freeways and greatly affect the delivery of electricity, natural gas and water to Southern California. This can lead to a scenario, she says, in which "secondary failures turn disaster into catastrophe."

"We need to come to grips with what is in the future of Southern California."

That is a scary thought, but this also is one of the more earthquake-prone areas in the world. Being prepared is the best tonic.

"Our goal is to change the culture," Jones says. "We all know we're going to have an earthquake, but we don't talk about it."

She says that an earthquake could occur that is so big, "you can't drive away from it." That raises the question, if you can't drive to safety, can you safely stay put?

Here is OC Family Magazine's checklist for your family. Take the time to immediately address your individual needs:

» Have a plan in case you are away from the house and can't get back. Do the children have access to your safety kit, primarily water? Make certain they know how to dial 911, when to dial it, and how to provide the home address.

- » Earthquake drills. Have an exit plan from your home in case the Big One hits in the middle of the night. Provide flashlights - and remember where they are - in multiple rooms, on multiple floors, so that at least one can be reached in time of need. Put in fresh batteries on the first of every month.
- » Drinking water is the most essential item: Estimate 1 gallon per person, per day. If it took five days before the federal government could help New Orleans, then figure five days is what you need in water supplies. Buy the gallon jugs at the supermarket and always have many more bottles of everyday drinking water at hand than you'd normally need.
- » Your home should have an emergency box of supplies that is both reachable and sensible. Have a manual can opener or two inside. Have a first-aid kit with relevant, updated bandages. No need for freeze-dried food, as it is expensive. Instead, have an overstuffed kitchen cabinet of dried and canned goods, such as cereal, breakfast bars, canned fruits and vegetables and other healthful snacks (go light on the cookies).
- » Have a working fire extinguisher on hand. Typically, insurance companies require that you place it under your kitchen sink.
- » Make sure your smoke detectors are working.
- » Take some first-aid and CPR coursework. The American Red Cross is a good place to take classes.
- » Talk out contingency plans with neighbors. Determine who might need help in a crisis, such as a single mom with three young children, or an elderly couple who are housebound.
- » Ask an out-of-state friend to be your "family contact." After an earthquake, it's often easier to call long distance. Other family members should call this person and tell them where they are. Everyone should know this person's phone number.
- » Check on earthquake insurance. In the case of a major disaster, FEMA, the federal government's disaster arm, would be involved in heavily damaged homes not covered by a policy. FEMA received such poor grades in its New Orleans and Gulf Coast response that many homeowners may now opt to count on an insurance company, despite high premiums.
- » Decide what you want to bolt down inside your house. An earthquake is going to move things, but you have some control. Make certain there is nothing, or very few things, in bedrooms that can end up hurting a family member. Also, put locks on your kitchen cabinets so plates don't go flying out. Rule of thumb: Move heavy objects to lower shelves.
- » Make certain the water heater is secured with straps.
- » Fill your bathtubs up immediately after an earthquake, in case water is shut off shortly after the shaking.
- » Post emergency numbers by the phone.
- » From the American Red Cross: If you use a computer regularly, back up data regularly.
- » Keep your gas tank at least half-full, in case you need to travel quickly and far. Of course, the best advice is not to travel unless you need to. And, a major earthquake may make travel of any sort impossible for several days.
- » If you have a baby, have plenty of formula, and dozens of diapers, on hand. Southern California is a bad place to have a just-in-time inventory as far as children's needs are concerned.
- » Secure your garage. Keep on ground level paint and oil cans that will spill. Make certain the emergency pull on your electric garage opener work, in case you have to manually open the door.

» Should you care for a disabled person, check with his doctor on preparedness tips.

AFTER the earthquake, follow this checklist from the Los Angeles City Fire Department:

» Be prepared for aftershocks, and plan where you will take cover when they occur.

» Check for injuries. A bump on the head could be serious, a cut on the leg could get infected should you not be able to reach a hospital.

» Remain calm and reassure others. If you're not in control, who is?

» Check gas, water, and electric lines. If damaged, shut off service. Know where the main gas-line shut off valve is, and have a handy wrench next to it. The water shut off valve can usually be hand turned, but at least know where it is.

» Tune to the emergency broadcast station on a battery-powered radio. Listen for bulletins.

» Confine or secure your pets. (For information and ideas, go to the Surf City Animal Response Team's website, scart.us.)

» Use flashlights. Do not light matches or turn on any electrical switches.

» Some parts of your home may be too damaged; don't go looking for things (except missing family members) after the fact.

ReadyOC is an Orange County-based educational campaign funded by Department of Homeland Security. Its motto: *Be prepared. Be aware. Be involved.*

Information, while addressed to Orange County residents, is pertinent to all Southern California homes and businesses: readyoc.org.

Says Anaheim Chief of Police John Welter, who is involved in regional disaster response work "Preparing for emergencies is all of our jobs."

FIRE DEPT. CHECKLIST

Here are more ideas for emergency supplies, as Listed by the Orange County Fire Authority:

- Have cash and change on hand in case the ATMs do not work.
- Ax, shovel, broom and the adjustable wrench to turn off the gas.
- Bicycle and a city map.
- Sturdy shoes, heavy gloves for removing debris.
- Plastic tape, a staple gun and sheeting to cover broken windows.