

News

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Community Survey in East Palo Alto Focuses on Climate Change, Emergency Preparedness

Redwood City – A detailed, in-person survey in East Palo Alto, conducted by San Mateo County Health and the San Mateo County Mosquito and Vector Control District, shows that residents are prepared for emergencies but many face barriers.

Since climate change can increase the frequency of natural disasters and contribute to an increase in mosquitoes due to warm weather and increased rain, the survey sought feedback on the prevalence of mosquitoes and other pests, extreme heat, sea level rise and flooding, wildfires and air quality.

Conducted over three days in October 2022, trained field interviewers conducted a rapid needs assessment called a CASPER in English and Spanish, following a methodology to ensure randomly selected and geographically representative households. Developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response (CASPER) is used by epidemiologists and local governments to plan for emergency response and to gauge community resources, needs and perceptions.

Compared to the overall population of San Mateo County, residents of East Palo Alto have lower income levels, less access to health care and higher rates of COVID-19 infection during the pandemic than other cities in the county.

Half of residents in the survey said they had an emergency kit of supplies to prepare for a power outage, earthquake or other disaster, and 58 percent had signed up for [SMC Alert](#), the County's emergency alert system to warn the public of imminent threats and evacuation notices.

The survey drilled down into the specifics of household emergency preparedness, asking if residents kept copies of important documents (38.9 percent), identified an out-of-town emergency contact (34.2 percent) and had an emergency communication plan for family and friends to stay in contact (32 percent).

Other questions probed the preferred ways to receive emergency alerts (text message, 44.8 percent) and the barriers to communication during an emergency. Seventy-five percent reported no barriers, while 16 percent of respondents cited difficulty with English as a challenge.

The survey report acknowledges the significantly lower median household income for East Palo Alto residents (\$96,349), compared to the county as a whole (\$136,837), which contributes to greater vulnerability, especially when confronting climate change. As the report says, "Like surrounding regions, East Palo Alto is also experiencing an increased number of extreme heat days within a year,

which can cause heat-related illnesses or exacerbate pre-existing medical conditions among vulnerable populations including seniors and young children.”

While indicators for emergency preparedness were relatively high, residents were largely unaware (74.5 percent) of [utility assistance](#) and [rebate programs](#) to assist with air conditioning. The proportion of adults without health insurance coverage in 2019 was 23.6 percent, compared to 12.1 percent in the county. And despite data suggesting the need, few residents were aware of the no-cost services of the San Mateo County Mosquito and Vector Control District, which residents can call for assistance with mosquito issues, rodents, yellowjackets and wasps.

“Our District’s work is data-driven,” said Brian Weber, district manager at Vector Control. “The data from this report will help us strategically strengthen our outreach efforts so residents are more aware of the taxpayer-funded services we offer to everyone living in the county.”

At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they would like to be confidentially referred to a local agency for any urgent concern or need. They were also given a bag with various community resources, including information about Vector Control services, the Red Cross’ free fire alarm installation program, solid waste pick-up services, clean energy programs, a climate resilient housing program, information on asthma triggers, wildfire safety and the SMC alert system, as well as two COVID-19 test kits.

“The data are really valuable in helping local governments and community organizations identify gaps and opportunities for further engagement,” said Karen Pfister, County Health epidemiology program manager and one of the leaders of the CASPER project.

Led by County Health and [Vector Control](#), the survey was supported by East Palo Alto – based nonprofit [Nuestra Casa](#), whose staff served as field interviewers. San Mateo County’s Department of Emergency Management and the California Department of Public Health provided safety oversight and guidance.

The full report may be [accessed here](#).

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