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Local residents place high faith in the Community Warning System

By Nick Marnell

Even as they witness the bungling of millions of unemployment claims and havoc with the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine, Lamorinda residents continue to place their trust in one public entity, as the area leads Contra Costa County in the number of registered users of the Community Warning System.

CWS is an all-hazard public warning system, a partnership of the Office of the Sheriff, the Health Services Department, and other government and private entities. Its purpose is to deliver time-sensitive and potentially lifesaving information to the people of Contra Costa County.

The system is housed at the Sheriff's Office, and engages only when there is an imminent threat to human life or health, or when a community needs to undertake some sort of protective action. CWS manager Heather Tiernan summed up the typical content of the alerts: what is the emergency; where is the emergency; what you should do; why action is needed; and when the action will be done.

The system can fine tune its alerts to any relevant area in the county. "I can target just a couple of houses, if you really want me to," Tiernan said.

To reach registered users, CWS sends emails and texts, but also communicates via social media, through its own website and by using federally managed tools if necessary, like the Emergency Alert System. The system does make phone calls to registered users, but Tiernan said that is the slowest, most time-consuming contact method.

CWS limits its social media interactions. The system does not use Nixle, and employs Nextdoor for only education and outreach.

Local residents have responded positively to the outreach of the warning system thanks to the efforts of the Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team, the fire districts and the police departments. "We have a very involved and proactive community here," said Dennis Rein, Emergency Preparedness Coordinator of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. "You could tell by the great response to our virtual evacuation drill last year and the evacuation drills two years ago."

Statistics back up Rein's statement. The latest CWS figures show that, out of 5,800 Moraga households, 7,300 accounts are registered with the system. In Orinda, there are 8,100 registered accounts in 7,100 households, and Lafayette reports 8,700 registered accounts in 9,400 households.

"These are some of our highest registration numbers," Tiernan said. "The countywide registration average is about 30% of households."

"People want to know how and when to evacuate, and CWS is the way to go," Rein said.

To register, go to the system website at cwsalerts.com

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