Start 2018 with emergency preparedness in mind

The new year is a great time for setting resolutions—goals to strive for, things to achieve. This year, consider adding emergency preparedness to your list.

Massive flooding in Texas and Florida, and destructive fires throughout California serve as reminders that disasters are never far away. The occurrence of a natural disaster in Humboldt County is a matter of when, not if.

Getting fully prepared might sound daunting, but a few steps will go a long way toward success.

The main focus of emergency preparedness is preparing a family plan and assembling provisions and supplies.
We've turned the calendar page to 2018, but while the previous year is still fresh on our minds, I'd like to acknowledge a few highlights for me in 2017.

I was very happy to bring on Michele Stephens as our new Public Health Director and Emi Botzler-Rodgers as our Mental Health Director. Additionally, Kelly Hampton was promoted to Deputy Director of Social Services, and Zachary Smith was named Deputy Director of Information Services. All four have hit the ground running and are providing positive, proactive leadership in their respective programs and units.

In the past year we engaged in a number of important partnership activities, including The Forgotten Initiative’s “Day of Hope,” an event that brought members of our local faith community together to find new ways to support foster children, foster parents and Child Welfare Services employees. We are grateful to have been involved in that, and also in a collaborative project with First 5 Humboldt to address the high rate of Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, in the county. Additionally, we’ve joined a number of partners addressing recidivism in the juvenile justice system, and have been working closely with hospitals to better coordinate our response to people experiencing mental health crises.

A partnership with Danco enabled us to secure 15 units of Permanent Supportive Housing for residents who live with severe mental health challenges. That project, the Lodge at Eureka, was made possible in part by the support and commitment of DHHS. We’re still working to get some clients settled, but we are proud of this project and grateful to be a part of it.

The Blue Ribbon Task Force was another priority of mine in 2017. This group of partners and community members led valuable discussions of current challenges facing DHHS, and is currently working on identifying solutions.

As for the year ahead, we are going to be drilling down on recruitment and retention. With unemployment rates at historically low levels and a significant shortage of professionals in many areas and occupations, we’re having to step up our game to stay competitive in the local job market. We will be looking at new ways to expand recruiting, speed hiring, and retain those employees who want to join us in serving this community. Staff from all branches and levels of the organization have been working on an expanded onboarding program to support new staff, show them the ropes, and make them feel welcome at DHHS. I am pleased and excited about the work this group is doing, and look forward to its rollout in the weeks and months ahead.

I’m out of space for now, but there will be much more to come in the year ahead. As we move forward, let’s commit ourselves to treating each other with kindness, understanding and the respect that is due to all. Happy New Year. 

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**Art for Life Studio hosts annual show**

The Art for Life Studio and the Hope Center held their annual art show and sale at the Rainbow Room on Dec. 15. Artists pulled together their favorite originals and prints to share with attendees. Proceeds from the sales go back into studio supplies.

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From left, Jason Wenger with his painting “Ancient Churchyard” and Sean Erickson holds “Angry Cat.”

Angela Armijo’s portraits were on display at the show.
Foster parents Scott and Heather Peugh raised triplets Ariyah, Jayden and Gunnar Cunha for a year-and-a-half, caring for the toddlers as though they were their own.

Rebecca Cunha, the triplets’ mother, is the first to admit that she and her husband James had made a lot of mistakes. “We started using drugs. We were breaking the law. It was a mess,” she said.

But when their children were taken away, the 34-year-old mother said she was devastated. “I love them more than anything in the world,” Rebecca said. “But the first six months I did nothing. I was so deep in my addiction.”

In addition to doing drugs, the local couple were having run-ins with law enforcement that resulted in their arrest. But the final time Rebecca found herself in jail, she knew it had to be her last if she ever hoped to get her children back.

She took advantage of the time to complete a variety of self-help classes and secure a spot in a local rehabilitation program which she entered after she was discharged from jail. And when James completed his jail sentence, Rebecca said she picked him up and brought him straight to a rehab program. “He said, ‘Wow, I guess this is it.’” And it was.

In June 2016, after the Cunhas completed their court-ordered case plan, the judgment was made that the triplets could be reunified with them. They picked them up that day and they left. “We didn’t see them for six weeks,” Heather said.

Long-term foster parents, the Peughs are used to having four or five children in their care at any given time, including their two adopted daughters. But after the triplets left, they took the summer off from fostering. “It’s hard having the kids go,” Scott said. “When the kids leave it hits you in the heart, but you have to know that you’ve done your job up to that point.”

“It was like having a cloud over our heads,” Heather said. “It’s a grief that’s really hard to describe, and we’ve done it 20-something times.”

Late in the summer, the triplets’ dad reached out to Scott on Facebook and sent him a message letting him know that they were welcome to see the children anytime. “We met them for pizza the first time,” Scott said. Since then the two families have spent holidays together, gone camping, and the triplets come over to play and for occasional overnights. Heather said sometimes Rebecca calls for advice. “They might hassle their parents,” Heather said. “But when they come to our house, I mean business, I’m strict.”

Rebecca said the families have bonded and she appreciates the support. “They told us, ‘We love these kids; this is who we are. We want you guys to be a part of our family,’” Rebecca said.

And while they are not in touch with all of their former foster children, Heather said she and Scott are happy they can continue to be in the lives of the triplets. “We have really open contact. We just kind of extended our family.”

Rebecca and James both work now and maintain a home with their children. The triplets are adjusted to being back with their parents, and Rebecca said she values the close relationship they have maintained with the Peughs. “They thought that they had two moms and dads,” Rebecca said of the triplets. “They still think they do. I tell them they do.”

In the past five years, nearly 500 children in the DHHS Child Welfare Services system have been reunified with their families.

“A lot of people foster with the goal of adopting a child, and certainly we understand and appreciate that,” said DHHS Director Connie Beck. “However, our goal at DHHS is always to work with parents and support parents to get kids back with their family. We need adoptive parents, but more often we need people who can care for children, make them a part of their family, and still hope that they will be able to safely reunify with their family of origin. That takes a kind of selflessness I think is pretty hard to achieve.”

She said whatever trauma children have experienced at home, being removed from their homes is itself another form of trauma. “What these two families are doing, this is how it’s supposed to work. It can be really hard to get there but this is the goal.”

Humboldt County is always in need of foster homes. If you or someone you know is interested in fostering a child, please call 707-499-3410.
Two syringe disposal kiosks installed in Eureka

- Two syringe disposal kiosks have been installed in Eureka, and a third is on its way. The kiosks, purchased by DHHS, are intended to provide a safe and convenient location to dispose of used syringes.

The kiosks are located at the main Public Health and Social Services buildings. A third one is scheduled to be installed at the main Mental Health location soon.

“The kiosks were purchased in response to community members and partner organizations expressing concern about syringe litter, and asking for a place to dispose of used needles,” said Dana Murguia, a senior program manager with DHHS’s Healthy Communities Division.

The disposal bins are part of the department’s Syringe Services Program (SSP), which provides needle exchange, information about overdose prevention, referrals to treatment programs and other services.

“Syringe exchange is an important component of an SSP,” said Michele Stephens, DHHS Public Health director. “It helps reduce the incidence of new HIV and viral hepatitis infections by decreasing the number of people sharing syringes and other injection equipment.”

DHHS Director Connie Beck said, “Needle exchange is a proven harm reduction strategy which increases entry into treatment and reduces overdose deaths. What we want to do now is make sure we’re reducing the risk of harm to all county residents.”

Beck added, “The volume of needle litter in Eureka is unacceptable. DHHS has been working with its partners to reduce it, and is committed to continuing to do so.” She added that conversations about reducing needle litter are taking place in other communities.

The new kiosks are located at 529 I St. and 929 Koster St. Small sharps containers are available at each location’s front desk during normal business hours.

Humboldt Waste Management Authority also accepts sharps in appropriate containers and will dispose of them free of charge. For a list of drop-off locations, visit www.hwma.net/disposal-services/medical-sharps.

People who find needles within Eureka city limits that they are unable to collect or dispose of can report them to Eureka Police Department’s non-emergency phone number at 707-441-4044.

For more information, contact Public Health at 707-445-6200.
The California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS) and DHHS’s Public Health branch are partnering to improve pedestrian and bicyclist safety in McKinleyville.

DHHS’s Healthy Communities Division received a $125,000, one-year grant from OTS, which will go toward educating the community about McKinleyville’s new traffic safety features, which include colorized bike lanes, pedestrian refuge islands and mid-block crossings on Central Avenue. Funded through the grant, the Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Program will provide opportunities to practice safe pedestrian and bicycling behavior. Outreach will be conducted through upcoming bike rodeos, on-bike safety workshops and community rides, as well as a media campaign promoting vehicle and pedestrian safety. Much of the outreach will be geared toward youth through McKinleyville’s Parks & Recreation, Teen & Community Center and local schools. Healthy Communities and the Teen & Community Center have started a Redwood Riders bike skills and gear program and safety-oriented banners will begin appearing along Central Avenue.

The Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System reports that between 2013 and 2014, McKinleyville experienced eight bicycle and seven pedestrian-involved collisions. Nearly half of those collisions occurred on Central Avenue. Of California counties, Humboldt has the second-highest rate of pedestrian collisions and the 10th highest rate of bicyclist collisions in the state.

The Sequoia Conference Center was standing room on Nov. 15 during the Town Hall event focusing on the opioid crisis. The meeting was coordinated by Supervisor Virginia Bass and State Sen. Mike McGuire. During the event, a panel, comprised of local health experts and DHHS staff, discussed strategies for confronting Humboldt County’s opioid epidemic. New stats show Humboldt with an overdose rate five times higher than the state average. Bass and McGuire are planning another town hall for the spring.
DHHS Supervising Environmental Health Specialist Carolyn Hawkins is retiring after 24 years at the Division of Environmental Health (DEH). But not before the Board of Supervisors thanked her for her years of work on behalf of the citizens of Humboldt County.

Among other things, Hawkins tackled illegal dumping, served in the Hazardous Materials Unit and drafted the Local Agency Management Program. During the presentation, DEH Director Melissa Martel thanked Hawkins for her calm demeanor, balanced perspective and wisdom.

After nearly 18 years with DHHS, Staff Services Manager Andy Rix retired Friday, Dec. 15. During a special presentation, the Board of Supervisors thanked Rix for his years of service which have included working as an Eligibility Worker, Administrative Analyst and Program Manager before being promoted to Staff Services Manager in 2014. County Administrative Officer Amy Nilsen said Andy has worked closely with her office and said he will be missed. “We’re really appreciative of his sense of humor and his ability to get things done.”

DHHS is currently recruiting qualified applicants for a variety of positions. For a list of job opportunities, visit humboldtgov.org/hr and click Job Opportunities, or contact Employee Services at 707-441-5510.
JOB OPPORTUNITY

Learn about becoming an Eligibility Worker

Are you interested in:
- a career helping people?
- working for Humboldt County?
- a great benefit package, including health care, retirement and paid time off?

Join us to learn about a career as an eligibility worker with the Humboldt County Department of Health & Human Services.

Wednesday, Jan. 17, 2018
6 to 8 p.m.

or

Saturday, Jan. 20, 2018
10 a.m. to noon

at
The Professional Building, 507 F Street, Eureka

Topics to include
- how and where to apply
- how hiring works
- what it’s like to be an eligibility worker
- career advancement opportunities
- county employment as a career.

Refreshments will be provided.
Please register at tinyurl.com/EW-event-Jan-2018

For more information, call 707-441-5510.
The Transition-Age Youth Division (TAY) held a pre-Thanksgiving afternoon lunch for youth. Staff spent two days prepping and cooking for a traditional turkey meal with all the trimmings. Attendance was big, with more than 60 people enjoying food together on Nov. 15, at the new M Street location.

Social Services’ Holiday Luncheon on Dec. 12 brought in workers from throughout the department to celebrate the season and share food. The lunchbreak festivities didn’t end before ugly sweater and holiday hat participants got a chance to strut the catwalk.

Employees celebrate the holidays with festive sweaters and hats

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Big turnout for TAY holiday feast
An emergency preparedness plan helps ensure families know how to respond to disasters, and how to be of most help to each other and their communities.

Start plans by discussing these questions with family and friends: How will you receive emergency alerts and warnings? What’s your evacuation route? How will you communicate with your family if you become separated or communications systems fail?

Once you’ve answered these questions, start gathering supplies and provisions that could keep your family fed and hydrated for at least two weeks. One gallon of water per person daily is recommended. An adequate supply of non-perishable food should be kept in a cool, dry location. Don’t forget to plan for pets!

In addition to storing food and water, residents should also have an emergency supplies kit. Most kits include flashlights, batteries, first aid necessities, lighters, sleeping bags and medications.

“The first step is the hardest, but you can turn it into a fun family project that involves everyone,” said Linda Nellist, Humboldt Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) lead instructor. CERT is an all-volunteer coalition dedicated to training community team members and educating the public about emergency response.

“While you’re watching New Year’s Day football games, you and your family members can use a checklist to hunt for disaster supplies during commercial breaks and begin building that kit,” Nellist said. “You’ll be incredibly surprised how easy it is to collect important items. You already have many of them, they’re just spread out around the house.”

For more information, check out ready.gov where downloadable emergency preparation plans are available, as well as a full list of supply kit recommendations.

Unintentional falls are a major cause of loss of independence by elders. The average cost of a fall is $35,000 in medical bills. In response, DHHS Public Health’s Older Adult Falls Prevention Program created the DVD “Tai Chi for Balance.” Do you know someone who could benefit from tai chi as a way to improve strength and balance? Free copies are available at the Community Wellness Center, 908 Seventh St. in Eureka, as well as Humboldt State University’s Library and all 11 branches of the Humboldt County Public Library. “Tai Chi for Balance” can also be streamed here: archive.org/details/tai_ch_ for_balance.
Nearly 400 foster and adopted youth and their parents gathered on Dec. 7, for the annual Foster and Kinship Care Holiday Party at LifeHouse Humboldt in Eureka.

DHHS Social Services staff coordinated the event, which included gifts, singing, carnival games, a buffet meal (donated and served by Rotary Club of Arcata Sunrise members) and a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Claus. The Rotary Club, as well as local businesses, organizations and community members, also donated stocking stuffers and gift cards.

The event was started more than 10 years ago as a small get together organized by volunteers who wanted to do something special for foster children around the holidays.