

Urban Shield: Abandoning Hope Not Building Hope

by the Stop Urban Shield Coalition

<http://stopurbanshield.org/>



For the past 10 years, Alameda County has invested the lion's share of its disaster preparedness in the war games and trade expo called Urban Shield.

Following the city of Oakland pulling out as the Urban Shield host in 2014, and amidst growing opposition by residents across Alameda County, the Board of Supervisors has the opportunity to shift away from the cynical fear mongering at the heart of Urban Shield and toward an approach that responds to genuine Bay Area disaster threats by investing in health, food security, emergency shelter, and community resilience.

What is Urban Shield?

Urban Shield is 48 consecutive hours of international war games competition accompanied by a weapons and militarized equipment trade show. It has been held annually in the Bay Area since 2007, and is funded by tax revenue, the Department of Homeland Security's Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI), and by weapons manufacturers and other corporate sponsors. The war games have drawn participation from militarized police forces from around the world, including SWAT teams and similar forces from Israel, Qatar, Bahrain, Singapore, South Korea, and Brazil. Urban Shield activities have also been held in Boston, MA, and Austin TX, but both cities have discontinued the activities. Coordinated by the Alameda County Sheriff's Department and billed as an emergency preparedness activity, the war games perpetuate racist and xenophobic stereotypes, increase the use of militarized weaponry and tactics in everyday law enforcement, and cost taxpayers millions of dollars.

Urban Shield was initiated by Alameda County Sheriff, Gregory Ahern, upon his election to office in 2006. He has described Urban Shield both as a "terrorism training exercise" as well as a "community-driven event". However, community members have organized against Urban Shield since its inception. In 2014, community pressure caused the City of Oakland, which had served as the host for the trade show and a number of war games simulations since 2007, to cease hosting future Urban Shield activities. Community pressure to end Urban Shield has continued to grow and spread since that time.

How does Urban Shield Work?

Local Control of Law Enforcement Training

Urban Shield is coordinated by the Alameda County Sheriff's Office, using federal funds administered by a Bay Area "approval authority," and for which the City of San Francisco serves as the fiscal agent.

Though the process involves multiple local, state and federal agencies, the Alameda County Board of Supervisors and San Francisco Board of Supervisors have authority to intervene to control or stop funds for Urban Shield. Other counties and cities whose law enforcement agencies participate in Urban Shield also have authority to suspend or condition participation in Urban Shield.

How Urban Shield Is Funded

In California, UASI funds are channeled through the state's Office of Emergency Services to five geographic areas (Bay Area, Los Angeles/Long Beach, San Diego, Riverside, and Anaheim/Santa Ana), each of which establishes a local UASI authority.

The Bay Area UASI (BAUASI) is made up of eight counties and two cities in the region and is administered by an approval authority. In 2015, the BAUASI administered funds amounting to \$28.4 million.¹ Of this budget, \$5.9 million was granted to Alameda County for training and education activities requested by the Alameda County Sheriff with the bulk of the money going to Urban Shield. On the basis of the "nexus to terrorism" requirement for funding, UASI has also provided cash grants for equipment that militarizes local police departments, supplementing equipment granted by the Pentagon through its Section 1033 program.²

California Government Code § 25303 gives Boards of Supervisors broad authority to "supervise the official conduct" of county sheriffs. The Board's contractual power and its authority to accept or reject grants made to the county support a requirement that the Sheriff seek Board approval before soliciting UASI funds. Under California Government Code § 23004(c) and § 23005, a county's power to make contracts can be exercised either by the Board of Supervisors or by agents and officers acting under the authority of the Board. As a result, any agent or officer of the county wanting to enter into a contract must first seek Board approval.³

Flexibility of and Restrictions on UASI Funds

Federal legislation requires that 25% of UASI and other DHS grant funds be dedicated to "law enforcement terrorism prevention activities." In California, this requirement means that \$45 million of the total \$183 million in UASI and State Homeland Security grants for the state must be used for this kind of law enforcement. This is apparently fungible between programs and jurisdictions, as long as the state total for police anti-terrorism programs is at least 25%. In other words, BAUASI could eliminate some of or all law enforcement grants, as long as the state as a whole meets this requirement.

The Board of Supervisors, therefore, has the power to restrict or approve the resources for which the Sheriff's Department applies and receives. We implore the Supervisors to respond to community concerns about Urban Shield and to reject its continuation.

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- 1 The Counties are: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Monterey, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Sonoma. The Cities are: Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose.
 - 2 http://www.acgov.org/board/bos_calendar/documents/DocsAgendaReg_12_08_15/PUBLIC%20PROTECTION/Regular%20Calendar/Sheriff_225899.pdf.
 - 3 Alameda County Sheriff sought Board approval before accepting federal grant money. See Angela Woodall, Alameda County: Drone Meeting Ends with No Resolution, San Jose Mercury News, Feb. 15, 2013, available at http://www.mercurynews.com/ci_22593768/alameda-county-drone-meeting-ends-no-resolution. See also County of Alameda Board of Supervisors Meeting Agenda Item (Nov. 26, 2011) (requesting approval of a resolution authorizing the Sheriff to apply for and accept Homeland Security Grant), available at http://www.acgov.org/Board/bos_calendar/documents/DocsAgendaReg_12_04_12/PUBLIC%20PROTECTION/Regular%20Calendar/Sheriff_2012_HOMELAND_SECURITY_GRANT_PROGRAM.pdf.

The Social Costs of Urban Shield

Emergency personnel such as EMTs and firefighters need training that advances their skills and readiness to handle the medical and mental health crises that make up the vast majority of emergencies in Alameda County. By prioritizing Urban Shield/Yellow Command as the dominant emergency response training, the County subjects emergency personnel to an orientation which suggests that every crisis could be a terrorist attack and must be handled with military-like mindset and possible force. Rather than receiving training to save lives, emergency personnel are taught to defer to law enforcement and follow the chain of command even when that might mean withholding care or treatment.

When law enforcement agents are called on to intervene in everyday situations of medical or mental health crisis, the results are often deadly, especially when the person in crisis is a person of color. Sending fully armed cops to act as health service providers creates situations that quickly become escalated and result in the deaths of community members, such as the recent killings of Luis Gongora and Mario Woods in San Francisco by SFPD just across the Bay from Alameda County. In Alameda County, two 2015 police shootings by the Oakland Police Department within a week of each other involved victims with histories of mental illness.⁴ Indeed across the country, examples such as the deaths of Freddie Gray in Baltimore in April 2015 and Jason Harrison in Dallas in March 2015 reveal that an armed response to medical or mental health crisis results too often in the loss of life and trauma to communities and families.

Urban Shield Increases Police Violence

The Stop Urban Shield Coalition requested public records from 42 law enforcement agencies in the Bay Area that participate in the annual Urban Shield exercises to gain information regarding SWAT deployments between 1/1/2014 and 1/19/2016. Only 15 of the 42 agencies released information.

The responding agencies reported 310 SWAT deployments. 176 of these were for search warrants, arrests, field search or parole search. 12 were for public demonstrations and civil disobedience, 13 for “protective sweeps” (usually meaning dignitary protection), and 102 were for “critical incidents.” This means that 67% of the time SWAT is deployed for serving search, arrest and parole warrants rather than situations requiring specialized tactical assistance.

In the information garnered from the public record requests, only 51 mentioned the race or ethnicity of the community members involved and some of these were redacted or declined to state. Fifty-one community members were affected by search and arrest warrant raids of which 19 were people of color and 10 were white with 22 being redacted, unknown or undisclosed. The vast majority of white people affected by SWAT deployments (154) were engaged in civil disobedience.

This data, while grossly incomplete, suggests that in the Bay Area, search, arrest and parole warrant SWAT raids are more likely to be conducted against people of color. By various departments’ own reports SWAT teams routinely break down doors, use flash bang grenades, deploy gas, and even using armored vehicles during these raids. Not a single disclosed report referenced officers believing that their lives were in danger.

In response to a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest in December 2014, Berkeley Police planned to “Get um’ running! Stretch the crowd out.” This plan and concept of operation was under the command of Lt. Andrew Rateaver, who has participated in every Urban Shield exercise since 2007, and now commands the Berkeley

4 <http://www.sfgate.com/crime/article/Oakland-police-officer-shoots-man-said-to-be-6079800.php>

SWAT team. Police physically harmed journalists, clergy, bystanders and people giving aid to the injured, as well as those actively protesting. Other commanders who planned the December 2014 police action also received Urban Shield training. Lieutenant Alyson Hart was responsible for planning and intelligence, while Captain Erik Upson was the incident commander; Hart and Upson were trained in Urban Shield in 2010 and 2011.

In 2009, Oakland Police Department's SWAT team won the Urban Shield competition. That team included Patrick Gonzalez, Frank Uu, and others who have been found to use excessive force during the Occupy Oakland protests and in individual cases involving severe beatings, strip searches, and officer-involved shootings resulting in the death of Oakland residents ⁵

Urban Shield Cements Racist Narratives in Emergency Response

Urban Shield scenarios use disturbing and dangerous racialized imagery that establishes who needs to be rescued and who needs to be killed or taken into custody. For instance, images from Urban Shield 2014 depict an active shooter scenario showing a dummy posed as the shooter in stereotypical "Arab" clothing. In another scenario from 2014, a SWAT officer is shown preparing to enter a plane to save a group of passengers (again dummies), all white. The Urban Shield promotional video features patriotic imagery which is then interrupted by video footage of the Twin Towers burning. A t-shirt company that takes its place at the Urban Shield expo among AW50 rifles and Bearcat armored vehicles hawks shirts that read "Black Rifles Matter." This racist fear mongering is a steady theme running through Urban Shield in which the Bay Area invests millions of dollars.



5 <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/SevenDays/archives/2013/09/25/oakland-council-gets-earful-over-urban-shield-war-games>

The Stop Urban Shield Coalition is collecting stories from people who have experienced SWAT. Here is the story of one local resident.

Brian, Oakland, CA

“Seeing a barrel of a gun just pointing at me...like it was really... that was it...I was gonna get shot.

I felt like we were violated.

When I was in the fifth grade...it was 3 o'clock in the morning and I heard a loud bang go off... They broke through the front doors, so I was thinking we were getting robbed. And what my mom told me in that type of situation, you always have to get on the floor-- like get on the floor, and stay quiet. So then I started hearing, dozens of people come into the house. And I'm terrified. I'm thinking "Oh my God, something really bad is gonna happen." And all I hear is the name of my mom's boyfriend getting called out, saying that they have a warrant. The room to our door was locked and so I just hear them break it open and like three to four people come in with automatic weapons and turn on the lights and they're pointing at me and my brother, and as soon as they see that we're kids, they just say, "one of them's on the bed, one's on the floor." And I just act like I was asleep and that they woke me up.

You know, it's three in the morning, they take us out of the house and it's really cold, and as soon as they take us out I see that our—we have a gate—and I see that the side of the gate that opens up is on the side of the road, because they broke it down with an armored truck.

They just kept searching the house throughout the span of four more hours... As soon as they were done, they just left.

There's always gonna be a gap between law enforcement and the community. Militarization is just making that even worse, because it's striking terror into the community, it's treating it as if it's a war zone, you know?

Economic Impacts of Urban Shield

The amount the Alameda County Sheriff allocated to “enhance homeland security, exercise, evaluation and training programs,” the vast majority of which fund Urban Shield and Yellow Command exercises and the expo constitute nearly \$5 million of the \$6 million granted by UASI. A 2012 report by former Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) found that UASI “was transforming into an entitlement program for states and cities, and that the Department was effectively subsidizing state and local government’s public safety expenditures, which creates a significant potential for waste in how these funds are spent.” The study also found that UASI and

other DHS grant programs were wasteful and lacked transparency. Senator Coburn concluded in an extensive subsequent study that “states and localities were using funds provided by DHS’s grant programs to acquire equipment, including armored vehicles and long range acoustic devices that may contribute police militarization and excessive force.”⁶

According to Alameda County Sheriff’s office documents, 35 law enforcement agencies participated in Urban Shield exercises in 2015, constituting about 280-300 individual law enforcement officers. Of those, between 80 and 90 officers were employed by cities located in Alameda County, constituting spending of somewhere between \$51,840 and \$69,840 in officer pay, per day of the exercises (accounting for overtime). This number does not include additional county staff that could be participating in a technical or administrative capacity.

As noted above, a continued commitment to participation in Urban Shield contributes to a reliance on SWAT deployment, with negative social costs. In turn, actual spending could spread outward from funds allocated through UASI with an expectation that Alameda County taxpayers would take on additional cost burdens. For example, a plan by Alameda County District Attorney to purchase a controversial cellphone surveillance device came with a \$535,000 price tag. Much was made of the cost being covered by the UASI grant stream, but in reality nearly 70% of costs would come from city budgets.⁷

Some corporations acting as vendors at the expo (through hardware, technology, weapons, or administrative services sales) have also made substantial campaign contributions to Sheriff Ahern’s electoral campaigns. Contributions to Sheriff Ahern’s reelection campaigns by Faber Trust Group, Adamson Police Products, SF Police Credit Union, J&R Sports Supply, LLC, Corizon Health, and 511 Tactical account for more than \$115,000 over the past 5 years. As long as the sheriff (who is the driving force in Urban Shield) is personally benefiting from the corporations doing business at the expo, he will be invested in Urban Shield continuing.

A Case for Alternatives: Abandoning Hope or Building Hope?

The Bay Area UASI releases millions of dollars each year under the initiative’s charge to “prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from terrorism.” The UASI acknowledges, however, in its own RFP language, that “many of the capabilities which support terrorism preparedness simultaneously support preparedness for other hazards, including natural disasters and other major incidents” and stipulates that UASI funds may be used for other preparedness activities so long as those activities would also shore up anti-terrorism capabilities (as noted above, no more than 25% of funds need be allocated to law enforcement). While the Bay Area has not experienced high level terrorist acts and has not been a target of a significant number of threats during the period in which UASI has been providing this funding, it has experienced significant harm from drought, wildfires, earthquakes, and similar natural disasters. Further, geologists predict major earthquake activity (at 6.0 or above) in the region within the next 10 years. According to Alameda County’s own statistics, 13% of the County’s population lives in poverty and one in five residents receives direct assistance from the County. Cal WORKS grants remain below 2008-2009 rates (about 80% of Cal WORKS recipients are children). 235, 570 people in the County face food insecurity.⁸

Despite the County’s vulnerability to emergencies in which its most at risk residents would suffer greatly, Alameda County has persisted in squandering UASI resources that could be used to shore up emergency

6 Senator Tom Coburn, *A Review of the Department of Homeland Security’s Missions and Performance*, January 2015.

7 <http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/alameda-county-da-seeks-controversial-surveillance-device/Content?oid=4381519>

8 FY 2016-2017 Proposed Budget Book

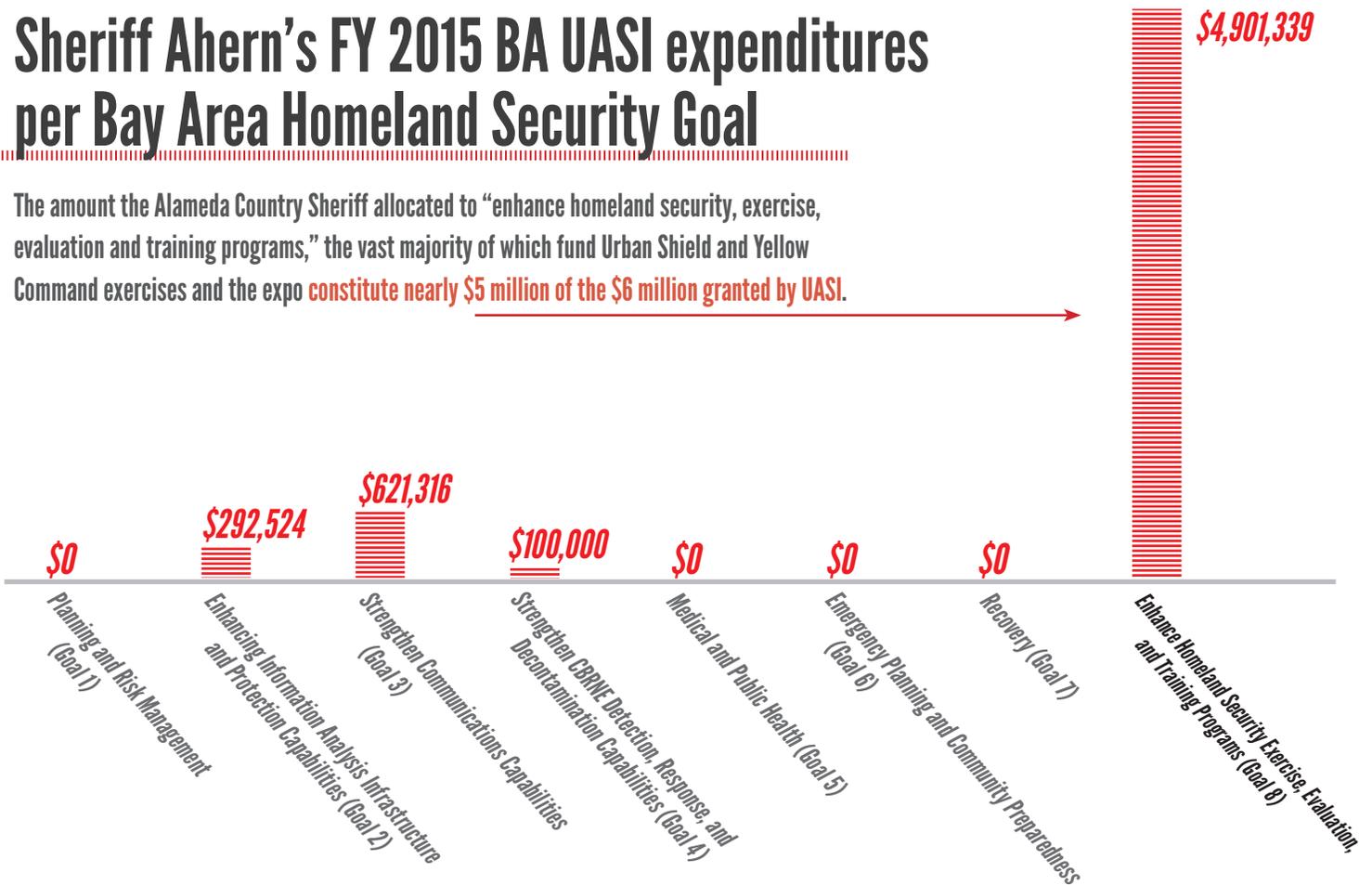
shelter, food reserves, and health services on the Urban Shield war games and trade expo. Rather than take a cynical approach that prepares for disasters by instilling fear, racism, and xenophobia in local residents, the county could, even following UASI's own logic, draw down resources from the same funding stream to address the real dangers residents face while increasing their abilities to build stronger networks to respond to whatever they may face.

As noted above, prioritizing war games as the primary emergency response preparation not only draws precious resources away from preparation for the real crises facing Alameda County residents, but also has social and political costs. Since 2007, the lion's share of funding that could be supporting emergency preparedness in the Bay Area has been poured into increasing the militarization of local law enforcement. The climate of increased police killings, militarized raids and sweeps, and surveillance technologies including drones has frayed already tattered community/police relations, destabilized neighborhoods, and broken up families across the Bay Area.

As the numbers above reflect, at the same time that millions of dollars are being used to prepare for domestic warfare, no funds are being requested for the most basic emergency preparedness allowable in the areas of planning and risk management, medical and public health, emergency planning and community preparedness, or recovery. This exorbitant investment in militarized law enforcement strategy does not seem to be making the Bay Area safer.

Sheriff Ahern's FY 2015 BA UASI expenditures per Bay Area Homeland Security Goal

The amount the Alameda County Sheriff allocated to "enhance homeland security, exercise, evaluation and training programs," the vast majority of which fund Urban Shield and Yellow Command exercises and the expo constitute nearly \$5 million of the \$6 million granted by UASI.



The time has come for the Bay Area to shift its orientation toward preparing for emergencies.

We must begin to insist that the health and wellbeing impacts of such preparation lead our efforts rather than go left unaddressed and UASI funding could be mobilized to support that shift. While new initiatives could be created to meet that need, there are many projects already in place addressing similar issues. Expanded funding for pre-existing programs is just one way to shift the County's emergency planning priorities. ***Below are just a few examples of the many organizations and projects currently at work in the area that could use additional financial resources to scale up their scope and effectiveness.***

Communities of Oakland Respond to Emergencies (CORE)

CORE is a free training program for individuals, neighborhood groups and community-based organizations in Oakland. The program operates from the idea that a major disaster will overwhelm first responders leaving many residents on their own for the first week to 10 days after the emergency. Initiated after the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989 the program expanded its curriculum after the 1991 fires and currently trains people to prepare for earthquakes, fires, severe weather, chemical accidents, and terrorism. The program emphasizes basic household preparedness and also emphasizes community building and strengthening relationships between neighbors. The program was initially funded by FEMA and is currently funded by the City of Oakland.

Community Emergency Response Team (REACT/CERT) training programs

CERT programs provide 20-hour training curricula that train local residents in emergency preparedness. CERT trainings teach skills including basic fire suppression, light search and rescue, triage and shock treatment as well as support to put together home disaster kits. CERT programs are running in cities including Alameda, Berkeley, Emeryville, Richmond, and Hayward.

Learn, Lead, Lift – Oakland

Learn, Lead, Lift is geared toward low income communities and people of color to integrate all neighborhoods in emergency planning, preparedness, and mitigation efforts regardless of social, cultural, religious and economic status. The program seeks support culturally appropriate emergency preparedness by starting in the areas of Oakland that experience significant social and economic challenges. The program was piloted in Havenscourt, Elmhurst and Acorn housing with hopes to expand it to Sobrante Park, San Antonio and Fruitvale neighborhoods.

Learn, Lead, Lift is coordinated by City of Oakland Fire Department, and the Office of Emergency Services. The program was initially funded by UASI as a pilot project, but the funding was not renewed and resources for the project to continue are unclear.

Collaborating Agencies Responding to Disasters (CARD)

CARD, which closed in 2015 due to lack of funding, was created after the Loma Prieta quake of 1989, to work with nonprofits and the people they serve. CARD offered a “fear-free” orientation to disaster preparedness and rejected what they described as “use of threat” to encourage preparation for emergencies. CARD focused on providing culturally appropriate emergency preparedness support for Alameda County residents whose needs were not being met by the Sheriff’s office. CARD’s empowerment-based approach suggests that communities will be better situated to respond to disasters of all types if they amplify community ties and bolster community resilience than if they are focused on neutralizing potential threats.

People’s Community Medics

The People’s Community Medics was founded in 2011 to teach basic emergency first aid so that people can help one another until an ambulance arrives. Since March 2012 the group has been giving free trainings in basic emergency first aid for treating seizures and bleeding trauma like gunshot wounds and stabbing to groups in Oakland, San Francisco, Richmond, Berkeley, Seattle and Oxnard. At their workshops, members of The People’s Community Medics hand out free first aid packets that have gloves, gauze, an instruction sheet in English, Spanish and Mandarin, emergen-C (for diabetics) and a “know your rights” pocket card. As policing of protest has intensified, the People’s Community Medics also shares knowledge of how to deal with police chemicals like tear gas and pepper spray.

Occupy Oakland Medics Committee

Initially formed out of Occupy Oakland, the Medics Committee continues to operate as a volunteer health worker collective providing first aid for actions. The group also does training for street medics, runs street medic scenarios to help people practice skills in responding to medical needs during large-scale public events.

Similarly, supplemental funds could improve community college EMT training programs, to increase communications systems to work well across not only law enforcement, but health first responders as well, and to supplement emergency shelter spaces, equipment, and health supplies.



Conclusion

As this report demonstrates, Alameda County decision makers play an important role in determining the nature, form, and implementation of the county’s emergency preparedness. Shifting disaster preparedness priorities toward community strength and resilience and away from war games and militarization is an important way to demonstrate a commitment to shoring up preparedness without making the county’s communities vulnerable. The cities of Boston and discontinued Urban Shield trainings after hosting the war games one time each. Neither area has experienced negative consequences of having shifted away from these hyper-militarized simulations. Alameda County could make the same shift and Alameda County’s leadership must take the lead in that change.