

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ITS ROLE IN THE FUTURE SURVIVAL OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Changes in Alameda County MAD's public relations efforts and the concurrent efforts of surrounding districts resulted in an increased demand for district services. Presented is a summary of service request volume relative to mass media events and ACMAD's ability to provide continued effective service without an increase in staff.

Ralph Heim's keynote presentation on January 22, 1996, underscored the need for all public service agencies to have the best public relations programs possible. With state government, Local Agency Formation Commissions (LAFCO's), the California Constitutional Revision Commission, groups like the Jarvis Tax Payers Association and possibly county governments all clamoring to restructure local government, particularly special districts, these organizations can no longer afford to function as "silent warriors".

The purpose of this paper is to remind everyone of the value of a strong community relations program and to illustrate Alameda County Mosquito Abatement District's (ACMAD's) efforts to change with these turbulent times for local government.

Approximately five years ago ACMAD began to aggressively develop a public relations program to better inform their constituents of the cost effective services available to them. The first step in this process was the creation of the Environmental Specialist position, whose duties included the development and implementation of a public relations and community education program. The second part of the process was incorporation of employee input and shared responsibility for success of the program. Figure 1 illustrates the current structure of ACMAD which has a manager and twelve employees that share in the day-to-day decision making of all aspects of the organization's activities and functions. Allocation of staff and equipment, the type and application of larvicides,

creation or evaluation and modification of district programs, employee evaluations, and future planning are examples of those responsibilities shared by all members of the District.

The current community relations program has the following elements:

- Proactive contact with the media (television, radio and newspapers) to inform them of upcoming events and District concerns.
- A school program that involves classroom presentations, supplying educational materials, and participation with school research projects and grants.
- Involvement in County shows, fairs, and regional events.
- Presentations to city councils, chambers of commerce, and community organizations.
- Development of a broad range of informational brochures for distribution to any individual in the county.
- Participation in state, regional and local committees and organizations involved in wetlands research, restoration and preservation.

Figure 2. Illustrates the effects of ACMAD's increased community relations efforts. Although the total number of public relation hours is still less than 1,000 per year, demand for district services (especially delivery of mosquitofish) has shown a significant increase. ACMAD has also found that irrespective of changes in precipitation levels, residents within the county have become more aware of the services available to them. Rapid response (usually within 24 hours of a request for service) has further resulted in the organization being viewed by its constituency as "unusually responsive government". This appears to be counter to the claims of the legislature and those organizations that feel there are too many unresponsive and unaccountable special districts and local governmental agencies.

Figure 3 indicates the weekly service request volume from 1 January 1995 to 31 July 1995. It should be noted that only mass media activities of ACMAD and its neighboring Districts are highlighted while other public contact events have been ignored. Throughout the time period there was a steady volume of mass media contact. However, the most significant service request volume occurred shortly after major flood events for the region which contributed to heightened public concern. Figures 4

and 5 provide a detailed breakdown of the service request volume by day for February and April, both of which were the season's highest peaks. An important feature to note is the cumulative effect of the other North Coastal Region Districts media activities on ACMAD's service request volume. It became quite apparent that the public relations efforts of neighboring Districts did increase public awareness and demand for ACMAD's services especially when a mass media forum (i.e., television or radio) was used.

Although ACMAD is still developing its public relations program, the resultant increased demand for the District's services has also had effects on other District functions. Increased public awareness has resulted in a need for increased efficiency to meet the demand and still provide the same level of service and freedom from pestiferous mosquitoes that existed in prior years. All of this has occurred without an increase in the number of field staff which has meant an increased workload for technicians. To compensate, there have been changes in how office staff function. For example, they now regularly participate in routine field operations such as handling service requests, performing mosquito source inspections and treatments, and maintenance and repair of

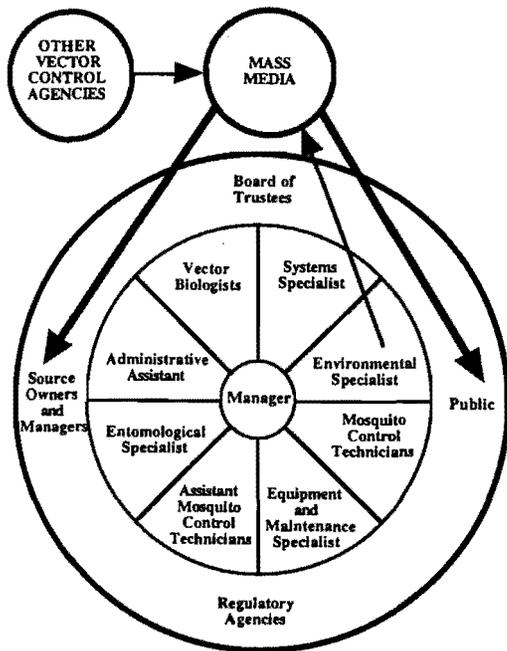


Figure 1. ACMAD organizational structure and relationships.

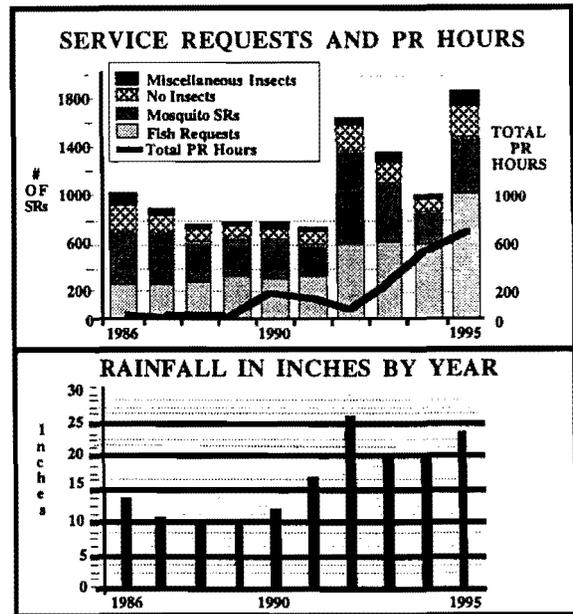


Figure 2. Service request volume by year and by type for 1986-1995. Total rainfall data and PR hours are included for comparison.

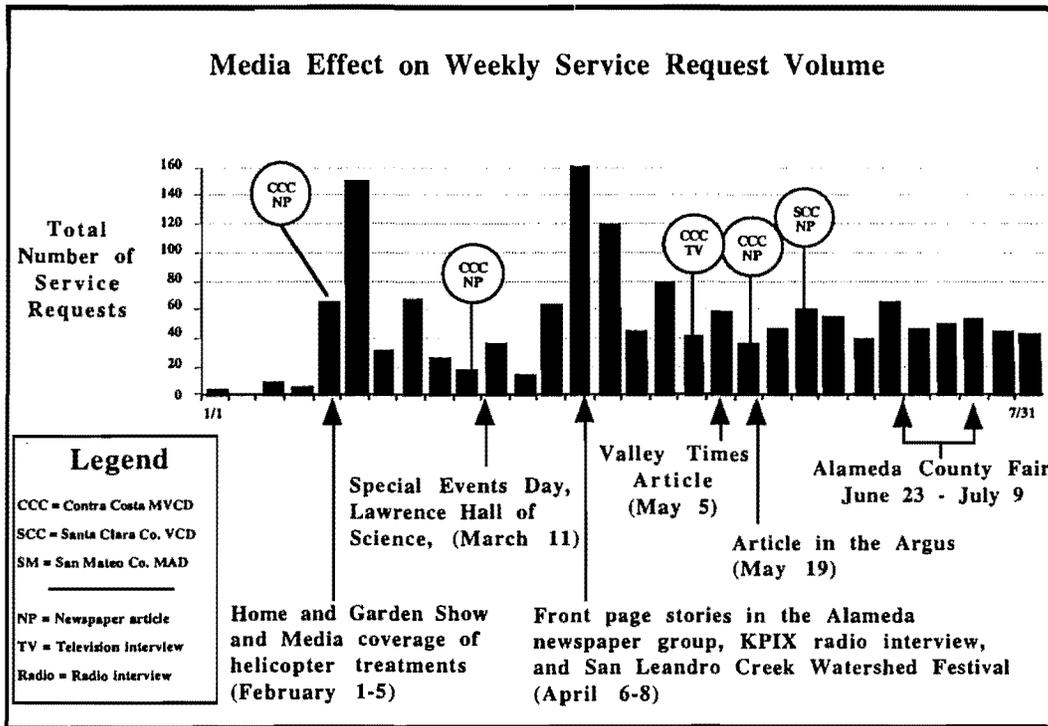


Figure 3. Relationship of mass media events to weekly service rates for January 1, 1995 to July 31, 1995.

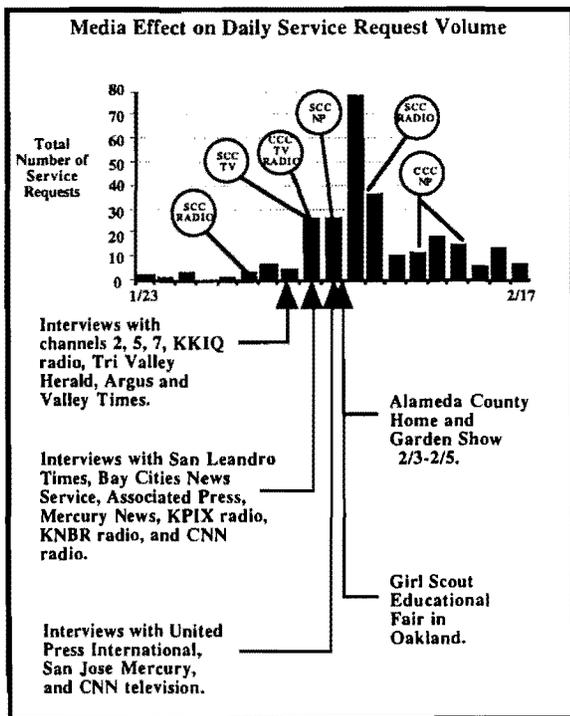


Figure 4. Daily service request rates for January 23 to February 17, 1995.

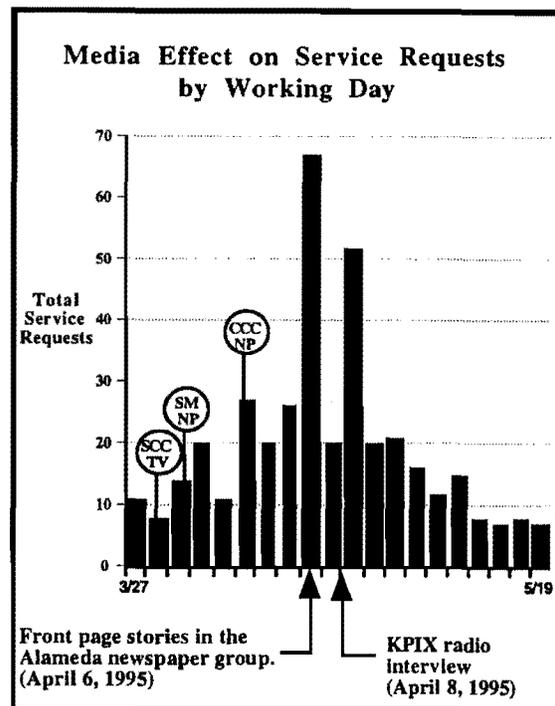


Figure 5. Daily service request volume from March 27 to May 19, 1995.

equipment. The change in job functions has also necessitated the need for increased communication amongst all individuals within the organization. Improved communication has also led to a better understanding of the relationships between all organizational members and the tasks they are required to complete.

In the final analysis, the survival of special districts will hinge on how aware their constituency is of who their local government is and what services they provide. Heightened awareness brings with it increased demands for service and an accompanying workload change. The ultimate task is for local

government to adapt, with the limited funds and staff available, to their public's rising demand for service.

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