



# MySafe:LA Podcast

Fire and Life Safety Education

Our mission: providing children, families, and seniors in Los Angeles with life-saving education, resources, and benefits.

## Episode 19

**LAUSD Coordinator Disaster Services and Emergency Preparedness, Jill Barnes**

**Announcer:** My Safe LA is the public education partner of the Los Angeles Fire Department. You're listening to a My Safe LA Fire and Safety Podcast.

**Todd:** Hi, everybody. I'm Todd Leitz the Public Information Officer for My Safe LA. This is another in our series of special earthquake related My Safe LA Fire and Life Safety Podcasts. I'm honored today to be joined by Jill Barnes, who's the coordinator for Disaster Services and Emergency Preparedness for the Los Angeles Unified School District. Thanks for joining us today, Jill.

**Jill:** Thanks for having me here.

**Todd:** The district is huge. It's far flung. There are hundreds of thousands of kids. How many kids are we talking about and roughly how much square mileage are you overseeing to make sure everybody stays safe while at school?

**Jill:** Okay. We have a lot of students in a lot of schools over a very wide range of area. We have about 710 square miles in the district. It goes all the way. I think the further south is San Pedro, all the way west to the marina Marina del Rey, east to Bell might be the furthest east somewhere out that way, South Gate those areas, and all the way north up to Sylmar. We have about 650,000 students in our K-12 programs. We have about another 400,000 students in evening programs, most of them are adult school students and then some of them are high school students doing credit recovery so they can graduate. We also have 100 preschools, which a lot of people don't realize. We even have a couple of infant centers. We have a couple of overnight programs. We're pretty comprehensive.

**Todd:** We've had some recent earthquakes here in southern California that have preparedness and people thinking about what should I do? What would I do if it was a more damaging one? Today we're talking about what should parents know if an earthquake were to strike while their kids are at school. How should parent's feel about the safety of their

children if perchance a significant earthquake were to hit during the school day or while their children were at a school facility?

Jill: Well, I think the first thing that I would emphasize is don't worry. We have prepared for earthquakes and other disasters. We have training. We have drills. We have a lot of things in place. We have supplies at the schools. People don't necessarily realize that our school buildings are built to do a good job of withstanding earthquakes. We have the Field Act in California, which was enacted in 1933. It specifies that public, K-12, California school buildings are built to a higher construction standard and inspected more frequently than any of the buildings in the state. What that means is in a significant quake our school buildings are less likely to fall down than some of our other buildings. Well, than all of our other buildings actually. What that means is that we're more worried about contents damage, which is why we practice drop, cover, and hold on. After the shaking stops, we evacuate out to the fields because we do want to make sure that our buildings are safe and will be evaluated before we have the students go back in. We have put in a lot of protective measures at the schools.

Todd: I noticed that you also have a pamphlet that you send out to the administrators at the school sites on how to store things and what could fall down in an earthquake and what could be a problem. Talk a little bit about that program and what response you've been getting from the school sites about how to properly set up the school so that it doesn't all collapse on people not the building but the contents.

Jill: Exactly. We've got a couple of things in place. We do have an office of Environmental Health and Safety that does regular school site inspections to check on all kinds of safety conditions. One of the things that they do check when they go out is they do check the supplies. They check for things like straps in place at the classrooms to keep furniture from falling over. We have reference guides that we publish so the schools have some protocols to follow. In terms of their preparedness, it tells them how much water they should have on hand, how they should treat it, when it should be cycled out. We have a lot of training for the faculty and staff. Then we also have a little cheat sheet to some common things that we see in classrooms that could be handled a little bit differently, so we can give them some guidance on how to make sure everything is safe when we do have that earthquake. We try to mitigate what we can. We want the impact of the school site to be as low and as light as possible.

Todd: Having the responsibility of hundreds or more children, who may be at the school site after a significant earthquake for hours or perhaps days,

what has the school kept on hand to make sure that everybody needs can be met?

Jill: We have a lot of supplies on hand. We have three days worth of water for every single person on campus just in case. Because in a disaster especially if you look at an earthquake, where we have a lot of infrastructure damage that's going to impact even how well the first responders can get around, but it's also going to impact how easily students and parents are going to be able to get to school. We do expect to be able to have students at school for quite an extended period of time. We have three days worth of water for every person on campus, students and staff. We have extra food on campus. We have search and rescue supplies. We have a search and rescue team. We have triage and first aid supplies. We have temporary toileting stations that we can set up. We have a variety of things that we've put in place. We have them all housed in a special container that's kept outside the school building, so if the school buildings are damaged we still don't have to go inside even to get our protective equipment.

Todd: Excellent. You mentioned before when we were talking off the record that every school district employee is also a disaster response worker. Talk about that because we all think of our teachers. They're not only great teachers, but they're also trained and ready in the event of just about anything, right?

Jill: Yes, because California has designated everybody who works for school district as any public employee, which includes school district employees, as a disaster service worker. What that means is if there is a disaster while an employee is at work, that employee does not get to go home. They will be staying at the school sites caring for the children. Now the great thing is school site people care for children every day. It's what we do. We take care of kids every single day. What's different in a disaster is we take care of different needs. Our schools staff is already halfway there because they're already used to caring for kids. It's just a matter of switching some of the things out and caring for kids in different ways. We do have training in place.

We decide in a disaster we assume that we're going to have to weather that disaster with just the stuff that we have on hand. We've decided to try to take a very internal approach. It's not that we don't want to have first responders to get there, but we want to make sure that we're able to take care of all the children's needs without them if we have to. Internally, within that school staff we have people who are designated to do search and rescue to look for people to save. We have people to do triage and first aid. We have people to take care of request and reunion, which is matching up the students and parents, so the students can go

home with the parents. We have people that are looking at the feeding and caring needs of the students. We have all kinds of things. Just about everybody on campus has a job. They're all designated out ahead of time.

We have safe school plans in our school districts. Our safe school plans are extensive. Ours is actually three volumes because it's too big we can't put everything if there. Volume one is all the preventive and mitigation things. Anything the school site does that creates that safe and healthy atmosphere for better learning goes into our volume one. Volume two is all the preparedness and response things. What can we do about an emergency and how are we going to respond to it when something happens. That's where it's designated who's doing what job in an emergency, which overall emergency actions that we take. It has procedures for twenty different types of emergencies in there. Then volume three is our recovery volume. That's talking about an intervention. That's talking about when something does happen now that it's over how do we get back to normal? What can you we do to support the needs of our students and there families to get every one back through a healing process. A lot of it has to do with mental health. To make sure that everybody's ready to get back to the business as usual which of course is the education of our students.

Todd: Excellent. As you can hear the school district has done it's part. It's taking it's responsibility for your children safety very seriously. Folks, parents, what are you doing? We want you to know what you should do in the event of an earthquake. Jill, let's talk about that a little bit. What courses of action can parents take to make sure before a quake happens that they do the right thing for their kids and to deal with that is school in the event of a significant quake. You mentioned the request and reunion gate that's pretty important, isn't it?

Jill: Couple of things that parents can do ahead of time is one always make sure that all of your contact information is kept completely updated at the school. Because when a disaster does happen we're going to try and reach out by calling and texting every single number that we have on hand in a disaster. We don't do that for everything. I know you guys get a lot of calls. They don't all go to all of your numbers, but we have an emergency one that will. We want to make sure that all of your numbers are always kept updated so we can message out to you to tell you what conditions are like at the school. If you know that condition of the school, maybe they well help you feel a little less worried about what's going on.

Something else that you need to be thinking about ahead of time is the next time that you're at your child's school, whether your dropping them

off for school or perhaps you're there for parent conferences or something, take a look and see where the request and reunion gate signs are. The request gate in an emergency is where you're going to go to ask for your child to be returned to you. There's a bit of a process there because we're going to be asking for ID. We're going to be checking that you are on the emergency card, which is something else that always need to be kept updated, who can pick up whose children. Then the reunion gate, which is in a separate location, so we can do a little by of crowd control. The reunion gate is where you would go to pick up you're child. It's good to know those things ahead of time. Especially, if you think in a disaster you might have to park several blocks away from the school. You might be coming from a different direction. This way you'll know exactly where to go. It's not going to be the front gate of the school as you usually go to in most cases. Those are the things that I would put in place ahead of time.

Some of the things to think about during a disaster. Once something has happened, when an earthquake has struck, of course you're first thought is going to go to your children. Mine does too. Mine goes to my children, however before you start worrying about what's going on think about a couple of things before you decide to hope in the car and get right over there. One, if you're not in the neighborhood right then and there can you get there. If you're working or you live a long way from where your child attends school, do a little bit of research, listen to the radio, find out what roads are available and open because you could end up getting stuck on the road somewhere and not able to go anywhere at all, which really isn't going to be very helpful. It's going to add to the load on the roads. Checking and making sure that you're route is clear. If your intention is to check your child out of school and take them home with you before you respond to the school go by your home first and make sure that your home is okay. Especially, with the schools being built to higher construction standards your home maybe damaged even if the school is not. If that's the case then you might need to do a little planning before you pick up your children to determine what you're course of action is going to be. It's easiest to have that planned out ahead of time.

When you do get to the school, please be patient and expect to be waiting a little bit. Because it does take a little bit of time to match up the kids properly with their parents. We need to do that one an one by on basis. We might have several people working it, but you're still matching up an individual parent with an individual child. That's a process that takes a little bit of time, so please be patient because we do need to make sure that we're sending home the right children with the right parents. We have to be aware of all of the aspects of safety when it comes to our students.

Todd: What's the policy on whom to release the children to? Does it have to be a family member. Is it something who's been vetted on the emergency documentation. How does it work? How would it work in a big disaster?

Jill: What we do it really in a way it really isn't any different than of our every day procedures because it does have to be something who is listed on that emergency card. You can list whoever you like. Most people list themselves and maybe another close family member. Think a little more deeply than that and think if there's a couple of extra people that you could designate. If you're not available, if your work thirty miles away, it may take you an awfully long time to get across town after an earthquake to pick up your child. Is there somebody in the neighborhood? Is there another relative?

Todd: Maybe a nanny or something?

Jill: A nanny, a neighbor, anybody that you would trust to pick up your kid and take them home to be on that emergency card. Even if you have to ask for a second card to put all the names down, the more the better. Because in an emergency it gives us more people that we can contact and more children that we can make sure are getting sent home and taken care of.

Todd: Indeed the school as Jill mentioned might be a safer location for your children than your home might be at that moment. That's something to consider as you mentioned. Also what's the policy for community members or neighbors of the school who might want to seek shelter in the school because they figure you've got supplies, you've got food and water, and you've got medical care. How's the district going to deal with that potential deluge of people coming from the neighborhood and wanting to get within the gates?

Jill: There's a couple of issues there. One is that the supplies laid in our school sites are for the students. It would be great if people realize that we want to make sure that we're taking care of our children and our students in our communities. That's what those supplies are there for. The other thing to keep in mind is that some people tend to think that every school automatically becomes a public disaster shelter in an emergency. Actually, there's quite a process that goes on. The first thing if we want to stand any public shelters, that's not a task that the school district takes on. Those shelters are operated by the American Red Cross. They work with us, and we work with all the city agencies and county agencies. The first thing we do is we know we need shelters they call me. We take a look at which schools we have, which schools don't have damage, because of course we're only going to be standing up public shelters that we've been able to evaluate already and know are safe to occupy. We have to look at are there students on that campus.

Because if there are students on that campus, we have to look at the load of that campus. Can we separate those out? Because when you have a public shelter operating at a school, the people in the shelter cannot have any contact with the students. Because again we're responsibly for all aspects of those children's safety. That includes everything else, including contact.

Something else related to that is a lot of people want to help in a disaster, which is one of the greatest things about human that nature. The best way to help at a school site during a disaster from outside the school gates, assisting with that request and reunion process. Because the lines can get long, it's great to have some community members, who probably know their neighbors. They may speak the languages that are common in the neighbor. They can work with the schools stuff on the other side of the fence, but they can keep things calm. They can keep things orderly. They can keep some vetted information rolling out to those people, so people have a better understanding of what's going on what, and why it's taking a little bit of time. It's going to be from outside the fence because again, have make sure that we're protecting or student's safety. We have to vet the people through a process that we have at the district that come in contact with our student.

Todd: Before we give some parents some assignments, some homework to do to make sure that we parents are holding up our end of the bargain because from what you're telling me it sure seems like the school district is. Let's talk about some of the resources that have online and elsewhere for parents in most people's languages as well that are spoken here in Los Angeles. Talk about that a little bit.

Jill: One of the best resource I think we have is we have a really good website [parentemergencyinformation.lausd.net](http://parentemergencyinformation.lausd.net). It's a long name, but it's the only one I could come up with.

Todd: Let me see if I got that [parentemergencyinformation.lausd.net](http://parentemergencyinformation.lausd.net).

Jill: Correct.

Todd: All right.

Jill: Strangely enough that's a website where we have emergency information for parents. We've got information on specific emergencies and how we deal with them at schools sites. There's a page on earthquakes and Tsunamis and lock downs and public health disasters. There's a page on communications with the school. There's a page on how the district prepares for emergencies. There's several different aspects of safety and disaster preparedness that we address on that page. There's a whole page of resources. Some of which have to do school districts, but a lot of

them are links for families to have useful things that they would need to know about in terms of emergency for their own use.

One of the things that website does it can generate a little card that you can print out and keep with you, which you can actually write in the phone numbers of the school. You can write in the location. You can write in where the request and reunion gates are and keep that with you so you've got that information with you when it happens. The entire website is not only in English but the whole website has been translated into Spanish, Korean, Chinese, and Armenian, so that we can serve the needs of our parents and other community members.

Todd: What do folks need to do? You mentioned they should know where the request and reunion gate being and be aware of the various process that it would take to get your children. Map out a route from perhaps where you work, where you might be elsewhere away from the school in the event of an earthquake. Maybe even map out a secondary route as well.

Jill: Definitely, yes.

Todd: There's some information that the parents should give to the school to make sure that that's up to date. You mentioned the phone numbers of various people who are authorized. You also want the parents to let you know any special needs their kids might have. Talk about that a little bit.

Jill: Correct. If you have a child that takes medication, has a disability, or any special need have a conversation with the school about how those needs can be supported in a disaster. Do what you can to be up front with the school about what those needs are and what caring for them might be. Because we're talking about disaster it's going to include hours when the student usually isn't there. Say for example medication, if a student takes a medication once a day and they take it at night say before they got to bed, the school may not know because it's not something that's done at school. However, say that earthquake happens at 3:00 right before a dismissal that child could still be there at 9:00 when it's bedtime. You want to have those conversations with the school about the needs of the students, supporting them, what could be put in place in terms of contingency measures.

Taking a look at how you can also come to pick up your student especially if you don't have transportation of your own. Who else can come request either pick up the child for your or give you a ride or what other avenues are open to you in terms of being able to come and pick up the student. Making sure that everybody knows at the school side about all of your student's needs and what might impact them during those times when they're not usually at school. In an earthquake we

drop, cover, and hold on until the shaking stops, which of course we practice at schools. We do a lot of earthquake drills. We do a lot of fire drills. We do a lot of emergency drilling. If you ask your child, I bet you they can show you. They'll be happy to show you what drop, cover, and hold on looks like. Do it at the dinner table.

Todd: Let's do it right now drop, cover, and hold on. It's so funny then in the wake of these recent earthquakes I was watching a lot of the news coverage of it. I was shocked and disappointed at how many people the reporter would interview and they would say I just ran outside. Doing the exact wrong thing that we should do and laughing about it. Also some of the ridicule that one of our local news anchors was subjected to in a good natured way which he actually ducked, covered, and held on when the taking was happening. He did the exact right thing, and people made fun of him. Don't be embarrassed. You got to know what you're going to do before the shaking starts, during, and after. You can be confident that the Los Angeles Unified School district because of people like Jill Barnes whose the Disaster Services Coordinator here have thought about every contingency. You need to think too parents. Jill, think so much for taking time to talk to me today. We really appreciate it. We hope to speak to you again on another of our My Safe LA Fire and Life Safety podcasts. See you next time.

Jill: Thank you

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