

Times Standard

Not My Fault: ShakeOut 2026: Kudos and areas for improvement

Lori Dengler for the Times-Standard

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Cal Poly's Safety Fair on Oct. 13 promoted the Great ShakeOut and featured preparedness tables from the Humboldt County and State Offices of Emergency Services, Red Cross, Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group, Campus Emergency Response Team (CERT), the Eureka National Weather Service forecast office and a number of other organizations.

Last week's Great ShakeOut is in the books, and I've heard back from a number of people about what happened, and general perceptions of participation and interest. Kudos to everyone who was aware of the event and at least spent a minute or two thinking about earthquake preparedness and how to keep yourself and your family safe.

North Coast education institutions were the participation champs in 2026. Almost every K-12 school in the area were official participants. The only schools not registered were several Humboldt County Charter schools including Laurel Tree, Fuente Nueva, Trillium, and Pacific View. If your children go to these schools, ask staff about their emergency plans and safety procedures. Maybe it was just an oversight, and they forgot to register but it would raise a red flag for me as a parent. It's a good idea for all parents to check in on school and classroom safety procedures whether the school participated in ShakeOut or not. It will remind school staff that emergency planning is important and give you peace of mind that the school is prepared.

Most charter schools do a great job for ShakeOut. I always like to put the spotlight on Redwood Coast Montessori located on the Samoa Peninsula in Manila. It's one of only two Humboldt schools within a mapped tsunami zone – the other is Peninsula School in Samoa. Both schools have a designated spot above the tsunami zone within a five-minute walk. Redwood Coast Montessori takes their location seriously and goes beyond the usual ShakeOut DROP COVER HOLD ON drill by practicing evacuation as well.

At the beginning each school year, the Montessori students adapt their backpacks to become dual purpose book bags and emergency Go-kits. At 10:15 AM on October 15th the ShakeOut drill alarm sounded, and everyone quickly slipped beneath their desks. After a minute or two, students and staff walked out of the classroom, collected their backpacks in an orderly fashion and walked to the nearby high dune evacuation spot. I witnessed one of these drills a few years ago and it was heartwarming to see the older students assisting the younger ones. The exercise continues throughout the school year. Each month at a random time in the school day, someone will sound the same alarm, and everyone will once again drop under their desks and then march to high ground, creating a muscle memory that will hold them in good stead for the rest of their lives.

Cal Poly Humboldt used ShakeOut week for a variety of campus preparedness activities. Called Safety Week, campus hosted workshops on personal and campus preparedness, water safety education sessions, CPR and medical response training, and a Safety Fair in the campus quad. Both campus and off-campus organizations involved with safety and preparedness participated including Red Cross, Campus Emergency Response Team (CERT), County and State Office of Emergency Services (OES), and the Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group.

I like the Safety Fair model for several reasons. It provides a broad variety of hazard and safety information, and it intercepts people who might not have thought how earthquakes, flooding, or other events might affect them. Workshops and talks attract people who are already interested and likely have a higher awareness level than the most. I hope some of the students and staff who had never thought much about preparedness walking through the quad may have been attracted by some of the tables, drifted over, and asked a few questions. Questions and talking are the key first steps in taking action.

The North Coast health community set a new high this year for ShakeOut participation with over 3600 registered participants, a 30% increase from last year. Providence and St. Joseph Hospital were well represented as were United Indian Health. But Open Door, one of our region's largest health care providers, was notably absent from the list and almost none of the smaller medical groups had registered. I had personal experience of this lapse on ShakeOut day. I was in the waiting room of North Pacific Dermatology at 10:15 AM when the MyShake App loudly alerted me that the drill was beginning. Staff didn't know anything about it and no one else in the waiting room reacted, looking oddly at me when I leaned over and covered my head and neck with my arms. I fear that many of the unregistered medical groups were likewise completely unaware.

I was happy to see two faith-based organizations on the registration list this year. United Congregational Christian Church in Eureka has been a steady participant since 2021 and this year, Christ Church in Eureka joined the list. I often attend Christ Church for music events and three years ago noted a card next to the hymnals proclaiming what to do in an earthquake. What a simple and effective way to reach many people. I know that many churches in our area

have held preparedness events, please let us know about them by signing up as a ShakeOut participant next year. Any earthquake preparedness efforts you take qualifies you in my book.

Not much progress in the business community to report. After my column three weeks ago about business vulnerability (Not My Fault 10/3/26), I had hoped to hear from at least a few in that community. Alas no emails or phone messages. A big thank you to Joe Bartosik with Redwood News for highlighting business preparedness on air and (I hope) getting more business owners aware of how important an issue this is. There was a small uptick in business registrations – thank you Eureka G.C. Gas, and our stalwart engineering firms SHN and Pacific Watershed Associates for signing up.

I'm always pleased to see the diversity of groups that register. Congratulations to Sequoia Park Zoo not only for their recent accreditation by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, but also as a ShakeOut participant. This is the tenth year the Zoo has registered, and it reflects their recognition that managing an earthquake event requires planning and preparedness to make sure that not only are employees and visitors safe, but the animals as well. I love the Sky Walk and I'm glad that plans are in place to communicate what we should do if the ground starts shaking while we are on it.

A question always asked about ShakeOut is "how do I know it is happening?" No Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) is sent to your phones, television programs won't be interrupted, and only a few radio stations opt to air a short ShakeOut broadcast. Most schools have an internal PA system that staff may choose to use for the drill; other schools might direct teachers to signal the drill on their own. Cal Poly Humboldt uses their emergency notification system to send out text messages to everyone who is enrolled. The MyShake App also sent a message – that's the audible announcement I received in my dermatologist's waiting room.

ShakeOut.org will send drill reminders beforehand but does not send out messages at the ShakeOut time. In past years, some counties including Del Norte, Humboldt, and Mendocino have used ShakeOut day as an opportunity to test their Everbridge emergency notification systems. This year, Del Norte did not, and I am still confused over what happened with Humboldt OES.

One only receives County alerts if you are enrolled in the system. I signed up when Everbridge was first adopted as Humboldt's notification system. I received no ShakeOut message on October 15th. I know many people who are also in the system and none of them were notified. Supposedly some messages were sent at 10:45 AM on ShakeOut day but I have no idea who they were sent to, why most of us heard nothing, or why the county diverted from the agreed-upon ShakeOut time.

Confusion causes distrust. Distrust makes systems ineffective. I reached out to Humboldt County OES staff about the ShakeOut lapse and have received no clarification. A similar situation occurred last spring during tsunami week. We were told the Humboldt notification system would be used for the March tsunami drill and did our best to let everyone know to expect a message ahead of time. A small group of people did get calls, but most of us heard nothing. The explanation given afterwards was a decision to target people in the tsunami zone. But I knew many people in Manila, Samoa, and Fairhaven who were likewise in the dark.

I have worked closely with county OES on the North Coast for over 35 years. In that time window, I've known at least six Humboldt and four Del Norte emergency managers. It's a difficult profession with an average tenure of under five years nationwide. Transitions are times when programs and priorities can fall through the cracks. Ryan Derby left Humboldt OES a year ago and rather than replace him, the Sheriff's Department opted to assign another person to double administrative duties. Budgets are tight and other areas may be of higher priority right now. I urge reconsideration of that decision. We need a steady, experienced, and fully committed hand at the OES helm.

ShakeOut notification is a small piece of the preparedness picture. The next strong earthquake will arrive unannounced. How well you, your family, and your community ride it through depends on actions taken now to prepare.

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