

If Strengthened, SB 758 Modernizes Our Disaster Response

California is on fire – literally, with dozens of life-threatening wildfires, and figuratively, as we close out an unprecedented legislative session. All of this against the backdrop of the global COVID-19 pandemic – a pandemic that has killed over 12,000 Californians with no end yet in sight.

We're all exhausted, but why are we not outraged? Why has this become business as usual? Now, in the final days of this legislative session, a better approach to disaster planning in California should be at the top of everyone's list.

If amended, Senate Bill (SB) 758 (Portantino, D-La Cañada Flintridge) can assemble an advisory group of the best minds in disaster preparedness to develop a new response to all manner of crises, including pandemic spread of deadly viruses of which COVID-19 will not be the last we see.

COVID-19 has shined a bright light on California's disaster planning, built for a local or regional disaster, where an earthquake in a populous area is the worst-case scenario. California's plans rely on "mutual aid" – when disaster strikes, help and resources from other areas are brought in to assist. That approach does not work in a pandemic where everyone needs help and there is no "extra" resource to bring in from within or outside of California.

Matters of public health in California, including infectious disease, are controlled at the county level. Is a larger spread of disease best managed differently in California's 58 counties or centrally at the state level? How do county and state regulations help or impede a more effective response?

What investments should be made in disaster preparedness in California? How do we ensure they are evaluated broadly and objectively, and prioritized in the context of today's crises and concerns?

California can no longer rely on 20th century models of disaster readiness. If amended to reinstate the advisory group, SB 758 creates the place where these vital conversations can occur.

At the same time, SB 758 puts on pause a state-mandated investment by California's hospitals in 2030 seismic retrofitting. That mandate, put in place 25 years ago, would have hospitals borrow and spend an estimated \$140 billion to meet an outdated and aspirational goal of being "fully operational" after an earthquake. California's hospitals already meet seismic safety requirements designed to prevent collapse and keep patients and workers safe.

It's time to revisit California's disaster priorities.

Meeting the 2030 seismic standards would have been difficult for many hospitals before COVID-19. Now, for some, it's an impossibility. That's because California's hospitals are suffering unprecedented losses as hospital care was shut down to prepare for a torrent of COVID-19 patients. By the end of 2020, Kaufman Hall, an independent consulting firm with extensive health care finance expertise, [projects that the cumulative net losses could exceed \\$22 billion](#), not to mention the financial damage facing hospitals for years to come. And that means they will face the decision to make the seismic investment or be forced by law to close.

Given the global pandemic, things are tough all over. But this Legislature and this Administration have provided not a dollar of relief to California's hospitals and the women and men who work there on the front lines of this disaster. Not one dollar of relief. **The seismic mandate pause included in SB 758 must be extended to no less than five years in order to provide meaningful financial relief.**

Passing a stronger version of SB 758 creates a statewide discussion of readiness given modern day disasters, while at the same time pausing a costly investment in seismic mandates to afford a new look at disaster investment priorities. That pause also gives much-needed relief to hospitals.

If returned to its original form, SB 758 is smart health care policy, which swept through the Assembly Health Committee on a 12-0 vote earlier this month. Now, as we've all come together to face the crisis of our lives, is the time to put smart policy like this ahead of politics.

I implore all of California's legislators, our leaders, to support an advisory committee approach and a meaningful seismic regulation extension via SB 758.



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