

WILDFIRE RESILIENCY POLICY STATEMENT (LOCAL VOICE, LOCAL ACTION, LOCAL CONTROL)

Introduction

California has long been vulnerable to impacts from a range of natural disasters, including wildfires, flooding, storms and earthquakes. In recent years, California has experienced the largest, deadliest and most destructive wildfires in this State's history. Fires over just the last four years have destroyed tens of thousands of homes, whole communities, threatened the health of our watersheds, and damaged vital infrastructure. Of greater tragedy is the loss of lives and the long-term mental health impacts for fire survivors and their communities. The devastation of these fire events will live on for decades.

Local governments' first-hand knowledge of social, economic, infrastructural and environmental community needs are invaluable in disaster response and recovery. County government plays a critical role in emergency management including law enforcement, emergency alerts and warnings, care and sheltering, watershed protection, evacuation, search and rescue, resource mobilization and recovery efforts. To maximize California counties' ability to effectively mitigate, prepare for and recover from disasters, our existing emergency response model needs to adapt to this "new normal" of increasingly catastrophic natural disasters. The change starts with the state and federal government recognizing that all disasters are local, which is why counties need a prominent seat at the table to address resiliency in California. Counties appreciate our federal and state partners' commitment to building strong partnerships with local government. Their support and resources are instrumental to counties preparedness efforts, disaster response and recovery.

This policy framework outlines key principles to support county governments' readiness to respond to and recover from disaster events, and emphasizes the importance of "local voice, local action and local control." This policy framework also recognizes the collaboration between agencies, importance of consistency/standardization between jurisdictions, and support for a comprehensive disaster management approach focusing on prevention, mitigation efforts, response and recovery.

Policy Statements

- I. **Counties are entrusted with mitigating the effects of disasters by securing stable and dedicated funding to achieve effective 365 days-a-year readiness to respond to and recover from extreme events.**

Emergencies can happen anywhere or at any time. Counties are obligated to be prepared to respond 365 days-a-year and must be able to operate on their own for 72 hours or more. The majority of counties are not prepared to handle a major disaster because they lack the dedicated personnel, tools and resources to develop and maintain a level of readiness to respond. Emergency Management needs to be viewed as a vital function of government and needs to be prioritized year round, even during times when there has not been a recent local disaster, because emergencies can occur anytime. **Federal and state partners can support local readiness by providing adequate funding for all elements of preparedness, response and recovery.** Dedicated and stable funding is needed beyond just planning. The State can support counties by providing yearly discretionary funding that can be invested into local emergency management programs based on the individual needs of the county. As part of the funding, counties would demonstrate accountability by providing annual reports on the activities completed with the funds. Being able to hire and train emergency managers, increase educational opportunities for staff and the public, invest in critical equipment/infrastructure and implement prevention projects are all necessary components to holistically address 365 days-a-year readiness.

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- II. During a disaster local elected officials operate at the policy and public relations level and should trust and empower emergency managers to run the day-to-day operations.

The public expects their local elected officials to be at the forefront of disaster response and recovery efforts. They look to elected officials for direction and reassurance. **It's critical that elected officials and the agencies they lead work together to develop a standard framework that enables elected officials to maintain a strong and visible leadership role, make sound policy decisions and remain informed so they can communicate effectively with their constituents both prior to and following disasters.** Educating elected officials on the role each agency plays and providing them with a framework on how they can be effective in their leadership role during a disaster, creates an environment where elected officials, first responders and emergency operations staff can effectively do their distinct job. When roles and responsibilities are clearly outlined, officials will be better prepared to respond and provide the public with a unified front and a cohesive message.

- III. Federal, state and local government must work together to reevaluate the emergency management approach and strive for a greater level of coordination and standardization.

Disasters do not recognize jurisdictional boundaries. Complex inter-jurisdictional incidents rely on close coordination and support between counties, cities and special districts in addition to state and federal partners. The California Emergency Management System is governed by the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS). Counties need to have a stronger voice in the SEMS maintenance system including actual meeting occurrences of SEMS Advisory Board in order to better ensure that SEMS provides the necessary framework needed to prepare for and respond to catastrophic disasters. In addition, federal, state and local government must work together and reevaluate the mutual aid model in order to facilitate more rapid and efficient response across jurisdictional borders. **Resources must be invested at the local level to develop a standardized coordinated approach between local jurisdictions that can successfully operate under the emergency response systems developed by federal and state agencies.** Part of the standardized approach includes a comprehensive coordinated effort to create standards for counties around Emergency Operations Center infrastructure, tools and resources and minimum emergency management staffing standards. In conjunction with standards, counties could benefit from guidelines and best practices for emergency alerts, communication mapping, repopulation process, communication systems infrastructure, handoff of responsibilities between agencies and roles, and responsibilities of federal, state and local partners. Furthermore, the State can assist counties with pre-established federally compliant emergency contracts that local jurisdictions can utilize. State and federal participation, support and funding are necessary to achieve this level of standardization and coordination. Along with funding, the state should reduce the regulatory burden for grants, housing projects and mitigation projects by streamlining processes, eliminating unnecessary regulations and providing exemptions when appropriate for critical projects.

- IV. In light of recent catastrophic disasters, there is a need to build greater capacity to conduct essential government operations during an emergency, and to resume all government operations rapidly and efficiently once the immediate crisis has passed. While the impact of an emergency cannot be predicted, prioritizing "Continuity of Operations" preparedness can mitigate impacts to communities affected by a disaster.

In the face of catastrophic and dynamic fires, counties must be prepared to maintain critical services to ensure Continuity of Operations throughout the duration of a disaster. Depending on the extent of damage after a disaster, governmental agencies may be forced to operate from widely scattered, makeshift locations with little or no notice, inadequate communications, and shortages of supplies, staff and other limitations.

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Communications amongst agencies would be difficult; day-to-day interdepartmental processes would most likely be impeded; and the public could become frustrated and disoriented due to the lack of access to normal governmental services. Resources from the state and federal government for Continuity of Operations planning and training are a critical component of readiness and preparedness. **The State must also look at long-term funding or possible reserves, outside of special legislation, to help counties and cities devastated by disaster continue to provide essential services that protect the health and welfare of the communities.**

- V. **Federal, state and local government must prioritize investment in emergency management technology and safety and resiliency infrastructure.**

Often, resources and capabilities vary between jurisdictions and look different in rural, suburban and urban counties. The chaos and stress of an emergency heightens human, technology and infrastructure challenges, which ultimately affect response capabilities that can put citizens in danger. **To build a more resilient California, counties need dedicated funding to upgrade Emergency Operation Centers (EOC) and develop alternative or mobile EOCs. In addition to EOC upgrades, the state should prioritize and fund statewide alert and warning tools to be used by all local jurisdictions, information and situational awareness sharing tools for consistency and redundancy and improving capabilities of the Operational Area Satellite Information System.** Mobile and satellite communication systems for counties should also be prioritized for improved and redundant communication capabilities in the field and between response partners. In support of redundant communication systems and effective alerts, the State can introduce legislation that defines private cell phone companies' obligations for cooperation with government agencies during a disaster. In addition, there is a need for a single point-of-entry common case management system for disaster survivors with the ability to share data between federal, state, local, and community-based organizations. A common case management system will reduce the "registration fatigue" many disaster survivors experience and facilitate coordinated service delivery of recovery resources. Investing in county emergency management technology infrastructure ensures counties have the necessary resources to prepare, respond, recover, and mitigate disasters. Federal, state and local partners must also prioritize investment in safety and resiliency infrastructure to access and manage public lands and ensure communities have safe transportation corridors to travel in an emergency.

- VI. **To respond effectively during a disaster it is vital to understand the demographics of residents and visitors and have the resources available to provide services to "populations with access and functional needs" (ANF) that might require extra assistance during a major disaster event.**

Federal, state and local governments invest significant time, money and resources in disaster preparedness, response and recovery. Often emergency preparedness, response resources and information for Access and Functional Needs (AFN) populations is limited or fragmented. In the context of emergencies, AFN groups may include individuals with disabilities, pregnant women, children, elderly persons, residents of care home facilities, prisoners, certain members of ethnic minorities, people with language barriers, and the impoverished. Many organizations that work directly with AFN populations are unable to share information with emergency management officials due to privacy and medical patients' laws such as HIPAA. California counties must be prepared to communicate and provide services to a diverse population. **Counties need participation, support, and funding from state and federal agencies to prioritize education and outreach activities to build a more robust relationship with vulnerable populations and the organizations that serve them. In addition, communications also need to be targeted to vulnerable populations, especially those constrained with respect to access to high-technology types of media, English language proficiency, and literacy. The state can support counties by providing standardized translation templates and funding for**

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services for non-English speaking communities before, during and after a disaster to ensure government can communicate effectively with all residents.

Conclusion

The CACE Wildfire Ad Hoc committee supports collaboration between agencies, a commitment to readiness, a standardized approach for California counties and adequate funding for all elements of disaster preparedness, response and recovery. County executives are committed to work together across all 58 counties to prioritize moving forward with building a modernized resilient disaster response and recovery model. We welcome the opportunity to engage with our state and federal partners to provide additional information that support our commitment to “local voice, local action and local control.”