



## Steve Pelham: Californians need to shake their legislators into action

By Steve Pelham

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MORE than 7 million Californians participated in the 2010 California ShakeOut Thursday, and that is a good thing. Individuals of all ages need to know and practice what to do to secure their own safety and the safety of their loved ones during an earthquake.

But, no matter how much we practice this vital exercise, there will be people who get hurt during the next quake and those people will need medical services at a hospital. What's more, there will be many, many more individuals already in hospitals who will require continuous care for their illnesses and injuries during and following an event.

We in California are counting on our hospitals to be able to handle those who need medical care during and after the next earthquake. The question is: Are California hospitals ready? The answer is: Not totally.

The last major temblor in California, the 1994 Northridge Quake of magnitude 6.7, damaged 12 hospitals in the Los Angeles region; an alarming

number. As a result, medical professionals were greatly compromised and challenged in their efforts to treat the 9,000 individuals who were injured in that quake, not to mention the thousands of individuals already hospitalized and receiving treatment for other illnesses and accidents.

This situation is serious. We are headed for another major event. While we may not know exactly when, California scientists have recently updated their predictions based on new information about past earthquakes. They now say a

major quake on the San Andreas fault is not only imminent, it's long overdue.

To make sure that our hospitals would be ready in time for the next event, California officials passed SB 1953 following the 1994 Northridge Quake. This legislation demands that, by 2013, all hospitals deemed hazardous and/or at risk of collapse or significant loss of life in a quake be replaced or retrofitted to a higher seismic safety standard.

In the past 16 years we have, indeed, fixed many of the state's weakest hospitals and built new ones where retrofitting didn't make sense. This effort is still under way.

But lately things have bogged down, and now we must make a new push to assure all of our medical facilities will be ready to meet the needs of 36 million Californians following the next quake.

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So what's holding up the process?

The major problem is California's fiscal challenge and the fact that state legislators need to reduce costs to balance the budget. But, putting the squeeze on the Office on Statewide Health Planning and Development as part of this cost reduction is putting all of us in jeopardy. With its current staff of 182 and an annual budget of \$56 million, OSHPD is faced with workload volumes of unprecedented magnitude.

The agency that is the essential 'gatekeeper' for assuring California's hospitals are safe is now forced to complete more work with fewer resources and look for more and more shortcuts.

Despite this pressure, OSHPD has done an excellent job of finding innovative ways to meet the challenge. For example, it has introduced a compliance review for small projects that can be completed in short amounts of time. And larger projects may now be completed using a phased plan review process.

But, if OSHPD is to effectively continue to regulate the development of hospital facilities, the California state Legislature must recognize the essential services they perform and empower them with the necessary resources. Furthermore, the health care industry must take advantage of every source of relief offered by the Legislature and continue to lobby for new sources of relief that are safe, make sense and improve seismic safety.

With the passing of time the potential risk of

earthquake damage to California's hospitals grows. We all must put pressure on our legislators to provide the necessary resources to assure our hospitals are safe. Given the new study by scientists on the imminence of our next big quake, we cannot wait any longer.

Stephen Pelham is president of the Structural Engineers Association of California.

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