

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 5, 2015

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We write to urge you to direct federal agencies to take both immediate and long-term earthquake preparedness actions at federal properties located in high-risk seismic zones. The U.S. Geological Survey reports that 16 states have a high risk of suffering a damaging earthquake. California's seismic risk is exceptionally high. The U.S. Geological Survey estimates that there is a near certain chance that the state will be struck by a major earthquake in the next 30 years.

The majority of deaths in major earthquakes are caused by severe structural damage to buildings, including collapse and the failure of unreinforced masonry according to a 2013 systematic review published in *PLOS Currents Disasters*. Agencies need to assess the seismic safety of properties and request federal funds for retrofits or replacements based on the highest-risk structures. For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs reports that the 316-bed hospital at the West Los Angeles Veterans Affairs Medical Center is seismically deficient and is located in a high risk area. The Department indicates that this medical center serves more than 80,000 veterans and is staffed by 3,900 employees.

There are low-cost steps that federal agencies can take immediately to prevent injuries and deaths during earthquakes. A University of California, Los Angeles, study of the 1994 Northridge Earthquake indicates that a significant number of injuries are caused by nonstructural components like furniture, fixtures, equipment, ceilings, and pipes. Beyond the threat to health and safety, this type of damage can impede safe evacuation, delay rescue, create fire hazards, slow post-disaster recovery, and increase repair costs. Simple steps like bolting bookcases to walls can save lives and make federal offices more resilient.

We've seen this outcome before—the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services reported that preventable injuries were caused by falling furniture and objects in both the 2010 Baja Earthquake, which struck on Easter Sunday, and the 2014 South Napa Earthquake, which struck at 3:20 A.M. in the morning. According to the office, these two earthquakes caused 333 injuries, many linked to non-structural damage. The only death reported in the South Napa Earthquake was linked to a head injury caused by a falling television. We have attached pictures of nonstructural failures seen at schools in both of these earthquakes. This type of nonstructural damage would have likely caused many more injuries and deaths had either of the earthquakes occurred during business hours while buildings like schools and federal offices were in use.

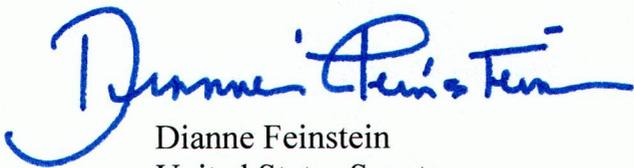
Given the inevitability of another major earthquake in the United States, we recommend you consider requiring agencies to do the following:

- Implement the Federal Emergency Management Agency's publication "Reducing the Risks of Nonstructural Earthquake Damage – A Practical Guide" to secure nonstructural components at federal facilities in high-risk seismic areas;
- Develop a strategy to assess federal buildings for structural seismic safety issues and develop a targeted, risk-based plan to address deficiencies that includes requesting funding for critical seismic corrections, as appropriate;
- Develop and practice an earthquake response plan so employees know how to shelter and evacuate appropriately during and after a seismic event, which could include participation in the annual ShakeOut Earthquake Drill; and
- Develop a continuity of operations plan to provide critical federal services following a major seismic event.

We also want to ensure that you are aware that the Comptroller General and the Inspector General of the Department of Veterans Affairs are conducting audits regarding the federal government's strategy to prepare for earthquake disasters. We plan to follow up with you upon the release of these important reports regarding any recommendations for further action.

Thank you for your attention to our recommendations regarding seismic safety.

Sincerely,



Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senator



Thomas R. Carper  
United States Senator



Barbara Boxer  
United States Senator

cc: The Honorable Craig Fugate  
Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency

Enclosure: Pictures of nonstructural damage in Baja and South Napa Earthquakes

DF/tc