



United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0504

<http://feinstein.senate.gov>

November 17, 2015

The Honorable Shaun Donovan
Director
Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20503

Dear Director Donovan,

As you prepare the President's Fiscal Year 2017 budget request for the Department of Veterans Affairs, I urge you to prioritize funding for structural and non-structural seismic corrections at facilities located in high earthquake hazard zones. I also request that you work with the department to ensure it takes appropriate steps to prepare for the next major earthquake disaster.

On Thursday, November 12, 2015, the Office of Inspector General released an audit at my request that included several troubling findings regarding seismic preparedness at the department's health care facilities:

- The department has not mitigated structural seismic risks for **28 of 97 critical buildings** located in high or very high risk seismic zones. Nearly \$7 billion worth of seismic corrections remain unfunded.
- The department has delayed corrections of nonstructural seismic safety hazards like heavy medical equipment and light fixtures, which are responsible for a many injuries and deaths during earthquakes.
- **Only one of the 18 facilities surveyed had tested operational contingency plans in the event of a damaging earthquake.** Practicing disaster response and contingency plans is a low-cost but effective step to improve disaster preparedness. The President's May 2011 policy directive is one of many examples that stress the importance of federal agencies preparing for major disasters.

The United States Geological Survey estimates that there is a greater than 99 percent chance that California will be hit by a 6.7 magnitude or greater earthquake

within the next 30 years. In fact, the Survey estimates that California is struck by a magnitude 6.0 earthquake every 1.2 years, on average. I have visited the San Francisco and West Los Angeles Veterans Affairs Medical Centers and seen firsthand the deteriorating structures at high risk of collapse in a major earthquake.

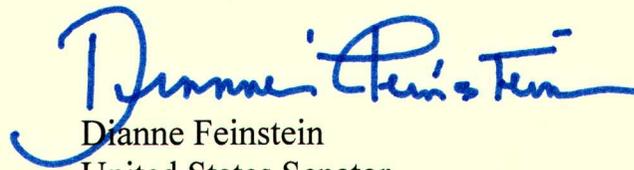
This is not a hypothetical concern. The 6.6 magnitude San Fernando earthquake in 1971 destroyed the hospital and medical complex of the San Fernando Veterans Affairs Medical Center. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the damage to these federal buildings was responsible for 47 of the 58 (80 percent) deaths caused by the earthquake. The Fiscal Year 2017 budget must make seismic safety a priority in order to prevent such a tragedy from ever occurring again.

Even low magnitude earthquakes can pose a serious public safety risk to seismically unsafe buildings. A University of California, Los Angeles study of the 1994 Northridge Earthquake found that a significant number of earthquake casualties are caused by nonstructural components like furniture, fixtures, equipment, ceilings and pipes. This 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 the department's medical facilities more resilient.

I wrote to the President on October 6, 2015, urging him to prioritize seismic safety construction projects at California's Veterans Affairs Medical Centers and again on November 5, 2015, asking him to direct federal agencies to better prepare for earthquakes. I hope that these warnings will not go unheeded.

I appreciate your attention to this request. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me, or you may have your staff contact Tristan Colonius in my office at 202-224-2004.

Sincerely,



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

cc: The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Enclosure: Inspector General Audit of the Seismic Safety of VA's Facilities

DF/tc