



CWDA
Advancing Human Services
for the Welfare of All Californians



February 26, 2025

To: The Honorable Dr. Akilah Weber Pierson
Chair, Senate Budget Subcommittee No. 3

Honorable Members
Senate Budget Subcommittee No. 3

The Honorable Dr. Corey Jackson
Chair, Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 2

Honorable Members
Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 2

From: Carlos Marquez, Executive Director, CWDA
Tiffany Whiten, Senior Government Relations Advocate, SEIU

**RE: EMERGENCY SERVICES AND DISASTER RESPONSE
SUPPORT**

The County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) request your support for \$70.9 million General Fund (GF) in FY 2025-26 and \$95.9 million General Fund in FY 2026-27 and annually ongoing to provide dedicated funding and resources to bolster county human services departments' provision of mass care and shelter, support emergency and disaster preparedness and response, and address unmet critical immediate needs of survivors that counties serve.

BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, and as most recently exemplified in Los Angeles, the state has experienced an unprecedented number of emergencies and disasters—catastrophic wildfires, earthquakes, intensive storms with severe flooding, and the COVID-19 pandemic. California will be recovering from these devastating disasters, including the Los Angeles wildfires, for at least the next decade, all while simultaneously responding to and recovering from future disasters. County human services agencies have been at the front line of these response efforts under the state's local-first emergency response system, balancing the continuity of safety net programs among their most vulnerable residents while also providing immediate support to the impacted public.

County Human Services Agencies Provide Frontline Emergency Services and Disaster Response Support in all Phases: When disasters occur, county human services agencies lead mass care and shelter efforts for county residents. While the California State Emergency Plan places the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) as the lead state entity for mass care and shelter disaster response, the state adopts a local-first emergency management system, putting local government emergency plans at the forefront of emergency and disaster response. Leading up to, during, and long after an emergency or disaster ends, county human services agencies have responsibility under local emergency response plans for the mass care and shelter of their county residents. The provision of mass care and shelter includes feeding, basic first aid, bulk distribution of personal services items, short-term emergency shelter or housing for displaced persons, among other activities. Depending on the severity of the incident, disaster housing may take various forms including temporary evacuation centers, short-term emergency sheltering, and interim housing.

County human services staff are often diverted from regular job duties and hours to facilitate and staff shelters, help victims apply for benefits, ensure continuity and access to public benefits for existing benefit recipients, and coordinate care and support with community and health care organizations. This includes coordinating care for foster youth and resource families. Furthermore, the roles and responsibilities of county human services departments have expanded significantly beyond just the provision of mass care and shelter services. In addition to mass care and shelter, counties take on the coordination of human and material resources to establish mass care and shelter services throughout their jurisdiction, disaster notifications and outreach, assisting program recipients with disaster assistance applications, transportation of program clients, and providing additional support to persons considered to be part of the “access and functional needs” population, in need of targeted and/or specialized services. Most county human services departments are tasked and are the lead department for post-disaster recovery support and services, with one-third of counties reporting that they provide support or services for more than 12 months after an event, beyond what FEMA, the CDSS Disaster Response Unit, and other entities provide. This includes tangible support for survivors and victims that address immediate human needs in the aftermath of an emergency or disaster such as transportation, food, and clothing.

Redirection of County Staff and Budget Resources for Disaster Response Jeopardizes Counties’ Existing Duties of Serving Vulnerable Clients: Importantly, despite providing support and care coordination for people affected by disasters, in many cases, county human services departments are unfunded for these activities and must instead rely on their own departmental funds. County human services disaster response activities as it relates to mass care and shelter services are generally eligible for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reimbursement when a disaster is federally declared. However, whether a disaster is federally declared depends on criteria including the nature and scope of the applicable emergency or disaster. Countless disasters, such as smaller wildfires, may not be federally

declared and eligible for FEMA reimbursement, yet county human services agencies still act rapidly to provide immediate support and services to impacted community members. In these cases, county human services departments must largely absorb these costs. This has resulted in significant impacts to county human services, reducing counties' capacity to respond to new disasters while also maintaining critical programs and services that vulnerable Californians rely on.

Specifically, when a disaster strikes, impacted counties must immediately redirect some proportion of their staff to emergency response activities; this includes the redirection of caseworkers, social workers, and others whose regular work is critical to the timely provision of human services programs. The number of staff, and length of time of the redirection, varies by the severity and duration of the disaster. While counties' staff are redirected for this critical work, their service and support to clients served in county human service programs—particularly CalFresh, CalWORKs, Child Welfare Services, Medi-Cal eligibility, Adult Protective Services, and In-Home Supportive Services—are diminished. Compounded by the aforementioned budget pressure, without dedicated funding and staffing for emergency services and disaster support, counties are hindered in their ability to successfully deliver services during an emergency while maintaining their level of service and commitment to clients in human services programs.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Specific Investments in County Human Services Department Response are Critical: County human services agencies are not resourced to timely deliver disaster-specific services, especially to lower-income individuals and community members with specialized needs, despite being at the forefront of local emergency and disaster response per the California State Emergency Plan. Dedicated staff, funding, and resources for counties are needed to improve emergency and disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. Just as CDSS is resourced with a Disaster Services Bureau to carry out its statewide disaster response duties of mass care and shelter, CWDA and SEIU request \$70.9 million General Fund in FY 2025-26 and \$95.9 million General Fund annually ongoing, as detailed below.

- Of this funding, **\$25 million General Fund in FY 2025-26 and \$50 million General Fund annually ongoing** will establish a new fund to provide flexible resources for county mass care and shelter and tangible supports for survivors and victims, where FEMA reimbursement or individual relief may not be available. These tangible supports include addressing immediate human needs in the aftermath of an emergency or disaster, such as providing transportation, food, and clothing. The fund may also provide temporary financial relief to cash-strapped counties who may be awaiting FEMA reimbursement, the process for which can take years at the federal level, creating tremendous budget uncertainty.

- Additionally, **\$45.9 million will equip county human services agencies with a new and dedicated unit** (an average of 3 FTEs per county) to **bolster emergency services and disaster preparedness and response**. Specifically, the unit would:
 - Oversee emergency response planning prior to a disaster to ensure continuity of key human services programs and benefits.
 - Support and coordinate disaster response efforts and care coordination, while ensuring the provision of human services benefits are not disrupted.
 - Assist with recovery efforts after a disaster.
 - Bolster ability to provide mutual aid capacity for neighboring counties when they suffer a disaster.

Note that this request is not for additional resources to cover the costs of all the staff and resources that are redirected during a disaster (in the event of a federally declared disaster, these costs may be reimbursable by FEMA). Rather, the requested resources would support a new, centralized unit at each county human services department to better plan and coordinate local resources, during both the disaster and recovery, and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of disaster response. This structure is consistent with that of the State's. Moreover, the creation of a new fund will bolster county resources to timely support county residents in their most pressing needs that may otherwise not be covered by FEMA, either because the individual or family is ineligible for FEMA relief, their needs are not covered by relief options, or the disaster is not federally declared, among other reasons.

Ultimately, without this funding, county human services agencies will continue to struggle to maintain the operation of basic, necessary social service programs while they simultaneously respond to the immediate needs of the community in disasters that are occurring with greater frequency and intensity. In light of the 2025-2026 1st Extraordinary Session and the \$2.5 billion in state aid for Los Angeles wildfires, we must ensure Californians who rely on counties for critical support during and after disasters and emergencies receive the same strong commitment from the State.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Carlos Marquez, Executive Director
County Welfare Directors Association

Tiffany Whiten, Senior Gov. Relations Advocate
Service Employees International Union

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