

Los Angeles County's meager budget for disaster response

The county is massive and at high risk, yet it has a fraction of what other major cities budget to respond to emergencies.

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By Brianna Sacks (The Washington Post)

Los Angeles County, the most populated in the United States, has a paltry budget for its office that manages natural disasters, major emergencies and other hazards such as cyberattacks and earthquakes, according to documents obtained by The Washington Post.

Documents that include a fiscal year 2024 budget sheet show the **county's operating finances for its Office of Emergency Management is about \$15 million**. The budget for this office is not typically made public, nor is it widely shared among emergency management employees. The details have not previously been reported.

Of the office's budget, nearly **\$4 million comes from federal grants**. The office has 36 full-time positions, and about **\$9.2 million of the \$15 million goes to salaries and employee benefits**, according to the documents and a person familiar with the county's grants and emergency management operations. That leaves a fraction for other key functions, including its utilities and office expenses. The county's executive office, which oversees emergency management, is going through its budget allocations for this year, according to a person familiar with the process.

"L.A. County has no real emergency management budget," said an official familiar with the county's grants and emergency management operation who, like others in this story, spoke on the condition of anonymity because of fear of professional retaliation.

"Essentially all the systems and projects are funded through grants, but we have to pick and choose and piecemeal together what we can work on and with to stay within the constraints of that \$4 million."

For a county with nearly **10 million residents** who live across 4,100 square miles, emergency management experts said that the office's budget is shockingly low, especially when compared with similar major municipalities. For example, the emergency management budget for New York County, also known as Manhattan, sits at about \$88 million; the office in Illinois' Cook County, home to Chicago, had more than \$130 million in funding for fiscal year 2025.

And L.A. County is no stranger to catastrophes. It has declared **74 disasters over the past 20 years** and is barely recovering from the January firestorm that was one of the most destructive in state history. It often hosts major events, such as some World Cup matches in 2026 and the next Summer Olympics in 2028. The county's emergency management budget underlines growing concerns about whether officials can properly prepare for and respond to all-encompassing incidents while carrying out everyday functions.

Los Angeles County, like Cook County and many other communities across the country, gets a chunk of its emergency management money from federal grants that fund mitigation, preparedness and security initiatives. The office uses those funds to cover critical services such as some salaries; equipment; their alert, evacuation and situational awareness systems; community preparedness initiatives such as distributing weather radios to hard-to-reach communities; all the office's trainings and exercises, including

those for the Olympics; updates to its safety plans; and cybersecurity planning, according to the documents and a person familiar with the county's grants. As the Trump administration continues to consider possible changes to the Federal Emergency Management Administration and curb the kind of grant funding sent to states, that could even further shrink the county's resources at a time when climate change, population growth and the upcoming Olympics and World Cup are maxing out what county emergency managers can handle, according to three people familiar with disaster management in the county.

The city of Los Angeles, which has its own emergency management budget of about \$4.5 million, has also been struggling to obtain more funding, the Los Angeles Times reported in May.

Unlike other public safety agencies such as police and fire departments, most people don't understand what emergency management offices do, experts say. There is little public education or exposure to emergency managers and the role they play in protecting communities — and that can make it even harder to push for funding that's already in short supply.

L.A. County's sheriff office, for example, gets more than \$4 billion of the county's \$48.8 billion total budget at a time when many other agencies had to make significant cuts. After the wildfires, and a sweeping sexual assault scandal that led to a historic settlement, county officials recently had to trim millions to stay afloat.

"We have historically always been underfunded," said Soraya Sutherlin, a disaster management area coordinator for a part of L.A. County. "So many emergency managers pay for their own stuff out of pocket because there is no money. That is how it works. We get creative. I can't provide paper copies unless I am paying to print them. We continue to do a lot with less and less."

Sutherlin and seven other disaster coordinators are funded through federal emergency management grants, which the county gets from FEMA and then disburses. Over the past five years, those grants have been slashed by nearly 40 percent, she said, and the county has not been able to fill the gaps. This year, she said her Disaster Management Area C office — one of eight such offices in the county — does not have enough money to cover operating expenses.

After the historic January fires that killed at least 30 people and destroyed tens of thousands of homes and structures across the region, the county and city came under intense scrutiny for its failure to prepare and respond.

The budget document shows the county switched its alert systems this past fall, shifting from one notification system called CodeRED to another known as Genasys. According to a person familiar with the systems, the best practice for switching from one platform to another is to have both systems running concurrently for about a year to enable training and practice. At the time of the fires, there were only two employees trained to send the new system's AMBER-style wireless emergency alerts when the fires sparked, a person familiar with the alerts said.

In the chaos of the rapidly evolving fire, officials did not send those warnings to an entire subset of Altadena, where 17 people died, The Post has reported.

The county had other issues sending alerts during the firestorm, sparking an investigation, and struggled to properly disseminate information to the public. As the fires unfolded, the county did not immediately set up a joint information center, and the Office of Emergency Management had only one trained public information officer, who

then had to evacuate, said a person familiar with the emergency management operations. It took a few days for the county to find additional people to help that official field the slew of requests for information and to coordinate messaging, documents show.

Emergency management departments don't just respond to major natural disasters. These agencies are responsible for projects that reduce risks and threats of all kinds and prepare communities and people for a wide range of dangers, such as cyberattacks, terrorism, earthquakes and floods; lead the recovery after such catastrophic events; train volunteers that may become community responders; ensure underserved and vulnerable populations are accounted for and have evacuation plans; and more.

"Emergency management has a tremendous scope of responsibility, and it takes a lot of different people with different skill sets, knowledge and experience, especially for a place like L.A. County, to effectively do the job," said Samantha Montano, an emergency management expert. "That is where this capacity piece becomes important. There is no way to do all the mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery that a community needs on that kind of budget. It's not possible."

After the devastating 2018 Woolsey Fire, a scathing after-action report concluded that the county needed to give more power and coordination to its Office of Emergency Management. The office received slightly more funding and added a few more people to its roster, but it is still far from where it should be, experts said.

L.A. County's operating budget also reflects a growing concern that recent disasters across the U.S. have further brought to light: that counties and communities are ill-equipped to protect people. When hurricanes, wildfires and flash floods sweep through, they further illuminate how often residents are caught without warning and without the proper information and tools to help them safely evacuate or escape.

"This is why we see these disasters play out," said Montano, also a professor of emergency management at Massachusetts Maritime Academy. "It's always been the case for underfunding emergency management because there are so many things in a community you need to find money to cover, and officials will take that risk that no big disaster will happen in their time."

When catastrophic flash floods rushed through Kerr County in the Texas Hill Country on July 4, years of meeting minutes showed that its emergency management coordinator had repeatedly sounded the alarm that the county needed more robust warning infrastructure. But it also did not use the system it did have.

Similar problems plagued mountainous communities in North Carolina when Hurricane Helene pummeled the western parts of the state, and in Maui when grass fires sparked in August 2023.

A recent study from the National Preparedness Analytics Center, part of the Argonne National Laboratory, collected feedback from more than 1,600 state and local emergency management directors across the country. Those officials said their departments are barely able to function because of a lack of funding, staffing shortages and burnout. Many rural agencies have only one staff member. Losing federal grants, they said, would mean they'd lose what few people and services they do have. If FEMA had to further winnow L.A. County's emergency management performance grant, Sutherlin's job would probably disappear, she said.