

SUBJECT: Improving emergency management services during and after a disaster

COMMITTEE: Homeland Security and Public Safety — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 9 ayes — Nevárez, Paul, Burns, Calanni, Clardy, Goodwin, Israel, Lang, Tinderholt

0 nays

WITNESSES: For — (*Registered, but did not testify:* Bill Kelly and Jamaal Smith, City of Houston Mayor's Office; CJ Grisham)

Against — None

DIGEST: CSHB 2320 would require the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) to collaborate with state and local agencies and public and private entities to create plans for improving emergency services during and after a disaster.

Telecommunications. The bill would require TDEM, as practicable and in collaboration with entities of the division's choosing, to include private wireless communication, Internet, and cable service providers in the disaster planning process. It would require the division to determine the availability of the providers' portable satellite communications equipment and portable mobile telephone towers to assist in response and recovery immediately following disasters.

Critical infrastructure. The bill would require TDEM to identify methods for hardening utility facilities and critical infrastructure, including hospitals and fire stations, in order to maintain essential services during disasters.

The division, in collaboration with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the Railroad Commission of Texas, and any other state agencies chosen by the division, would be required to determine

methods for effectively reducing risks and impacts on facilities and critical infrastructure from disaster.

These agencies would be required to encourage public and private entities that are responsible for utility facilities and critical infrastructure to implement the methods determined effective by TDEM. A utility facility owned or controlled by a utility regulated by the Public Utility Commission (PUC) would be exempt from these requirements.

Trade services. The bill would require TDEM, no later than November 1, 2020, to submit a report to members of the Legislature on improving the oversight, accountability, and availability of building trade services following natural disasters. In preparing the report, TDEM would have to consult with the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation and any other state agencies selected by the division, local governments, trade associations, and law enforcement groups. The report would include:

- strategies to increase the availability of tradespeople, including plumbers and electricians, following a disaster;
- approaches to increase prosecutions of alleged fraud related to building trade services offered following a disaster; and
- methods to encourage performance bond requirements in contracts for building trade services to be performed following a disaster.

This provision would expire January 1, 2021.

Disaster billing awareness. CSHB 2320 would require TDEM, in cooperation with PUC, to promote public awareness of bill payment assistance available during a disaster for electric, water, and wastewater services, including assistance for consumers on level billing plans. The two entities would be charged with providing the public with information about billing practices during a disaster to ensure that consumers of these services had an adequate understanding of their rights. The public awareness campaign would begin by December 1, 2019.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2019.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

CSHB 2320 would implement four recommendations from the Governor's Commission to Rebuild Texas to coordinate communications quickly and effectively during a disaster, improve the infrastructure of public services, reduce fraudulent business practices in the wake of a disaster, and increase awareness regarding utility bill payment relief programs.

Cultivating relationships with private-sector mobile phone, Internet, and cable services would allow the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) to collaboratively develop plans of action to ensure that critical communications infrastructure remained operable immediately following a disaster. Other critical infrastructure protected by the bill would include hospitals, fire stations, power plants, and water treatment plants. Developing strategies to strengthen the physical structure of these facilities would be a major step toward adequately preparing the state against the impact of future disasters.

CSHB 2320 would help protect the public from fraudulent business practices in the building trades following a disaster. In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, the lack of qualified plumbers, electricians, and other tradespeople created a fertile environment for scams. Working to increase fraud prosecution would benefit smaller communities that often lack the resources necessary to investigate and prosecute such crimes.

Requiring the Public Utility Commission and TDEM to promote awareness regarding utility bill payment assistance programs would help customers who experienced electric, water, or wastewater outages save money on services they did not receive. Clearly communicated information would help disaster survivors take advantage of these benefits and ease their financial situation in the wake of a disaster.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

No concerns identified.