



Emergency Services Districts Need Equitable Access to COVID-19 Relief

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By: Chief Kyle Taylor

Emergency services districts (ESDs) provide vital first response services to more than 8 million Texans. Around 300 of these local special district governments serve communities across the state with fire protection and emergency medical services – including the Hays County ESD 5, covering approximately 70,000 living within the boundaries of ESD 5. Yet, many emergency services districts, like Hays County ESD 5, have so far been unable to access the federal Coronavirus Relief Fund, which was intended to assist local governments in their response to the extraordinary COVID-19 crisis. The consequences of ignoring this problem will negatively impact communities' lifeline services.

Much like counties, school districts and municipalities, Hays County ESD No. 5 has been financially impacted by COVID-19. The District has currently sustained unbudgeted financial impacts approaching \$100,000, including station sanitation supplies, personal protective equipment, and overtime costs. It is extremely difficult to forecast how the District will be impacted moving forward. The need for personal protective equipment will continue and costs will continue to rise for those needed supplies. One firefighter testing positive for COVID-19 has multiple repercussions across his shift. Multiple firefighters will be quarantined for up to 14 days resulting in major overtime expenditures to cover those shifts. Emergency services districts across the state are facing the same financial impacts as our District. After we were all overlooked during the CARES Act funding and with an uncertain future, it is almost impossible to plan how this pandemic will impact us in the next fiscal year with no financial relief from the state or federal government.

Although a majority of special districts have well-established financial reserves, sustained losses and a lack of supplemental federal and state resources will prove to be a detriment to the health, safety and prosperity of our region. The prolonged strain of the pandemic is impacting more than just emergency services districts – other special districts providing water, wastewater, healthcare and more will also continue to feel the mounting pressures of unforeseen expenditures and losses due to the pandemic. Access to relief programs for special districts is now crucial to continue providing these quality services without further or sustained cuts to services and personnel.

Virtually no local government agency will emerge from this extraordinary crisis unscathed; but, special districts will need the support of leaders at the State and U.S. capitols to continue providing critical services as we strive to meet this moment while preparing for the emergencies and disasters we know loom ahead, such as tornado outbreaks and hurricanes.

Specifically, this can be accomplished through:

- Governor Greg Abbott and state legislators ensuring emergency services districts, along with other Texas special districts providing critical infrastructure, receive equitable access to future COVID-19 relief.
- The Texas Congressional Delegation co-sponsoring the “Special Districts Provide Essential Services Act” (H.R. 7073), which would direct a portion of future Coronavirus Relief Fund appropriations to our special purpose governments, and expand access to the Federal Reserve’s Municipal Liquidity Facility program for immediate access to capital. Emergency service districts thank Senator John

Cornyn for leading on this issue and being an original cosponsor of S. 4308, the Senate's version of the bill.

- Congress including state and local agencies in the federal payroll tax credit program for providing emergency paid family and sick leave for COVID-19-impacted employees.

With our state and federal partners, we can continue to provide services that help our Texas communities thrive. Together, we will continue making a difference.

Kyle Taylor is the Fire Chief of the Hays County Emergency Services District No. 5 in Kyle, Texas.

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