



To: Members of the Senate Committee On Veterans and Emergency Preparedness  
From: Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon  
Re: **EMO supports SB 288**

March 4, 2021

Dear Chair Manning, Vice-Chair Thomsen, and members of the committee,

Through eight service programs and a membership of 15 denominations and over 150 congregations and interfaith partners, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO) has become a trusted community resource for hundreds of thousands of Oregonians across the state. Oregon's faith-based organizations have become valuable disaster resilience assets due to the strong relationships we have built with disaster-vulnerable communities. **EMO supports SB 288, which incorporates faith-based organizations' expertise and resources into multijurisdictional disaster planning and helps address critical resiliency needs to help us better serve our communities in disaster.**

Religious institutions have a long history of serving their communities in times of need. In 1527, as the Black Plague was decimating entire communities, Martin Luther counseled people of faith that it was their duty to serve during disasters: "We should stay where we are, make our preparations, and take courage in the fact that we are mutually bound together." **Five centuries later, faith-based organizations continue to witness to the truth of our interdependence during emergencies**, like when [22 of EMO's faith partners](#) offered evacuees of the 2020 wildfires water, electricity, sanitation services and places to rest. Other EMO partners have spent years contributing to disaster planning efforts, including two dues-paying EMO members who participate in [Oregon Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster](#) (ORVOAD). The faith community's contributions to disaster preparedness efforts at all levels of government reinforce the Nonprofit Association of Oregon's statement in its [2018 disaster preparedness report](#) that nonprofits are "critical civic infrastructure" (1).

As noted by those who testified at the informational hearing last Tuesday, **one of the faith community's most notable roles in disaster planning is as a resource for under-resourced communities, including BIPOC, immigrant, refugee, and limited English proficiency communities.** In OSSPAC's "[Mass Care and Mass Displacement](#)" report from 2018, the commission asserts that "nonprofit organizations are ... regarded as a critical part of emergency response and recovery since they provide a range of social services that are essential to the livelihood of some of our most vulnerable community members" (5). As Andrew Phelps testified during the informational hearing, faith-based organizations are trusted partners in disseminating emergency information to populations for whom traditional means of communication might be inaccessible. In addition to communication networks, faith-based organizations often have physical space to offer

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Interchurch Center  
245 S. Bancroft St., Ste. B  
Portland, Oregon 97239

phone (503) 221-1054

fax (503) 223-7007

email [emo@emoregon.org](mailto:emo@emoregon.org)

website [EMOoregon.org](http://EMOoregon.org)

communities. In rural, immigrant, linguistically diverse, and otherwise vulnerable communities, a house of worship might be one of only a handful of buildings with accessible emergency shelter for large groups of people.

**That said, too many houses of worship still lack the resources to adequately serve their communities in disaster.** According to the aforementioned report by the Nonprofit Association of Oregon, “lack of financial resources” was the second most cited challenge to undertaking disaster preparedness. SB 288’s Unreinforced Masonry Seismic Safety Program would improve faith-based organizations’ capacity to serve during emergencies. EMO’s Northeast Emergency Food Program (NEFP) demonstrates the urgent need for such a fund.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, NEFP has served over 10 million pounds of food to nearly 400,000 individuals. Located in east Portland, NEFP serves people from Oregon and Washington, one-time clients and regulars, immigrants both documented and undocumented, refugees, people experiencing houselessness, people with disabilities, and children, who make up over 40% of our clientele. Because of our service, Oregon Food Bank has declared NEFP the most active emergency food program in the entire state. Years of commitment to its surrounding communities have established NEFP as an indispensable resource, especially during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 wildfires. Of course, as an Oregon-based program, the threat of a Cascadia Subduction Zone event looms large in NEFP’s operations, and NEFP recognizes that it must be prepared to serve its communities in the immediate aftermath of an earthquake. Unfortunately, the building in which it resides, Luther Memorial Lutheran Church, was built in 1948 with unreinforced masonry. This severely limits the building’s ability to survive a magnitude 7.1+ earthquake, much less operate NEFP at full capacity in the weeks and months after the earthquake. **Programs like NEFP, and the disaster-vulnerable communities they serve, could directly benefit from an Unreinforced Masonry Seismic Safety Program. There’s no better time to give these organizations the resources they need than right now, before the Big One hits.**

In conclusion, Oregon’s faith-based organizations have the experience, relationships and desire to coordinate with emergency managers and disaster-vulnerable communities. We are pleased to see that SB 288 incorporates faith-based organizations, with all our connections and resources, into existing governance structures for disaster response, and we support its funding for seismic safety upgrades that strengthen our ability to serve in disaster. **Therefore, we urge the committee to pass SB 288.**

Finally, know that we are keeping you and your staffs in our prayers, especially during such a critical time for those tasked with emergency management.

Sincerely,

Aaron Salzman, Climate Advocacy Associate  
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon