



# Guidance for Owners and Occupants of Posted Earthquake Damaged Buildings

Handout No: 71  
Issued: 6/13/19

This guidance is provided to owners, occupants and tenants of “posted” earthquake damaged buildings to answer many of the typical questions that arise following an earthquake. The issues covered include (1) the safety evaluation process and the meaning of each of the three safety evaluation postings; (2) the process of securing services to perform repairs; and (3) how to obtain aid from disaster assistance organizations.

### **Understanding Safety Assessment Procedures and Postings**

If a building you own or in which you reside or work is damaged by an earthquake it should be inspected by a safety assessment team or inspector working for the local government building jurisdiction (i.e. the City of Sonoma if within Sonoma City limits; the County of Sonoma if located in an unincorporated area of Sonoma County).

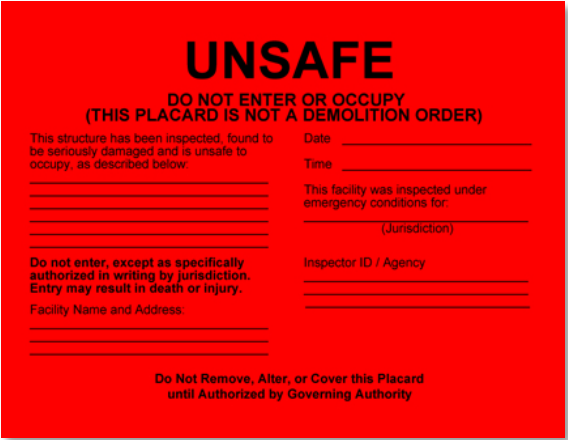
The assessment may not be possible until a few days after the earthquake, depending on the extent of local damage and the number of available qualified inspectors and engineers assigned to your area. If substantial damage is apparent, do not wait for an official City evaluation of the building. The prudent choice is to discontinue use and occupancy of the building to prevent potential injuries that may occur due to collapse or other falling hazard conditions that could occur unexpectedly or because of earthquake aftershocks. If you observe earthquake damage, it is recommended that you notify the City Building Department and engage a design or construction professional to inspect the damage, recommend repair work, obtain emergency permits, or begin repair work, as required.



When an authorized safety assessment team from the City of Sonoma arrives, it is very important that the team is provided access to the building and is provided information about any damage you have observed or are aware of. The first safety evaluation team to arrive will likely be conducting what is called a Rapid Evaluation. They will spend 15 to 60 minutes inspecting the property, depending on its size, complexity, and extent of damage. Their responsibility is to quickly determine if a building is safe enough to occupy, and if not, to decide what restrictions to place on its use or entry. The inspection will result in one of three posting placards (discussed below) being placed near the entrance(s) to the building indicating the outcome of the team’s safety evaluation. The team will also record the inspection findings and posting placard determination on an evaluation form for tracking purposes.

**UNSAFE Posting (Red Placard)**

If there is damage visible from the exterior that obviously poses a severe hazard for entry or occupancy, the safety evaluation team may be limited to inspecting only the exterior of the building. In such cases the posting most likely to be used is a red UNSAFE placard. This placard indicates it is unsafe to occupy or enter the building for any reason. Even when a building can be entered for inspection it is still possible that internal damage could pose dangers requiring an UNSAFE posting. It is also possible that an otherwise safe building must be posted UNSAFE because it is threatened by falling hazards from a nearby building.



The red UNSAFE placard is posted only when there is an immediate risk associated with entry, use, or occupancy. If an UNSAFE placard is posted, the building owner must apply for a permit to enter the building and mitigate the hazard by means acceptable to the jurisdiction.

This sometimes necessitates that the owner hire a design professional (engineer or architect) and a contractor to assess the risks and, as necessary, remove falling hazards, shore unstable elements, provide protective scaffolding, or otherwise mitigate the hazardous conditions that make the building unsafe.

It is very important to understand that the “red tag” UNSAFE posting does not automatically mean that the property has been condemned or will require demolition. Indeed, rarely is damage so severe or the threat to either an adjacent property or public right-of-way so high that an order to demolish a building is issued. City Building Department staff will contact and involve the building owner if demolition is needed.

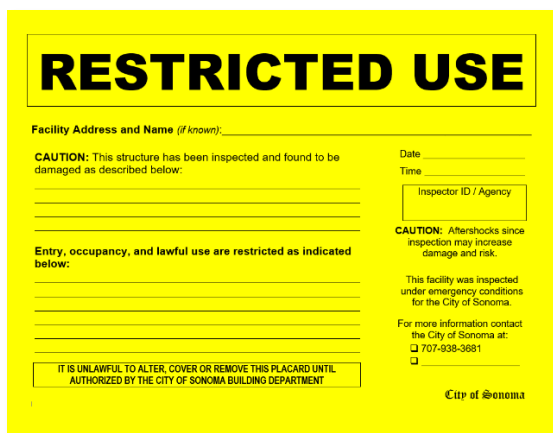
There are several options for building owners for the removal of goods from buildings posted UNSAFE, depending on the specific condition of a building and the City’s approval of the safety procedures proposed by the owner.

1. The owner, with or without the assistance of a construction professional, proposes to the jurisdiction a method of how and where the building may be entered without hazard for removing belongings. If this method is acceptable to the City’s Building Official, it allows the owner or tenants to enter the building in accordance with the method. The City may require that a permit be obtained. It may also require that any entry be under the supervision of City staff or the construction professional, and that hard hats or other personal protective equipment or clothing be worn by those entering the building.
2. At the discretion of the City’s Building Official, the owner takes out an emergency permit to perform sufficient work on the building to make it safe to enter to remove belongings. The owner will need to present a hazard mitigation and entry plan that is satisfactory to the City Building Department. The City may require that licensed engineers or contractors prepare this plan and supervise its execution. This plan might include shoring of parts of the building, removal of falling hazards, construction of overhead barriers, or other means that permit safe entry to all or part of the building. This plan may or may not be a part of an overall plan to repair the building.
3. The City’s Building Official may believe that the building is so precarious that no hazard mitigation measures are possible that would permit even limited entry to remove belongings. This can occur when the building condition creates an undue risk even to workers attempting to mitigate the hazards. Keep in mind that the possibility of aftershocks weighs in on every decision made by the Building Official. If no hazard

mitigation plan is proposed that is satisfactory to the City's Building Official, the building may need to be demolished with the belongings still inside. The urgency of this determination will depend on whether the building threatens an adjacent property or public right-of-way. The timing of the actual demolition, if required, will be dependent on the risk involved and any environmental or other regulations or legal processes that may be needed prior to the demolition.

Jurisdictions have often taken an active role in expediting the above options when the building owner has been unwilling or unable to perform. In the case of tenant demands for access and owner inaction, the jurisdiction may need to mitigate hazards as necessary to allow for limited access to belongings for tenants. The jurisdiction may also need to proceed with demolition if an immediate and imminent safety hazard exists and the owner is uncooperative. When this occurs, the costs incurred by the jurisdiction to mitigate the hazards can be recovered by the jurisdiction from the property owner through a lien on the property or other legal means.

### **RESTRICTED USE Posting (Yellow Placard)**



An intermediate posting called RESTRICTED USE is used by the evaluation team to address situations where a clearly unsafe condition does not exist but the observed damage precludes unrestricted occupancy. For example, if the evaluation reveals damage of a nature that requires that there be no entry to a portion of the building or some restriction on the use or occupancy of the whole building, the yellow RESTRICTED USE placard will normally be used.

Examples of nonstructural damage that could lead to a RESTRICTED USE posting include the loss of use of basic sanitary facilities due to

broken water or sewer pipes or damage to a fire sprinkler system required for safe full occupancy. Localized structural damage may place a portion of a building in an unsafe condition while other areas remain usable. Overall damage may be such that entry is appropriate for occupants to remove belongings and for contractors to make repairs, but is not appropriate for normal occupancy. A description of the limits or conditions of continued use will be written on the placard.

RESTRICTED USE placard. If you are present when a RESTRICTED USE posting is made, you should ask the inspectors for a clear explanation of the limits placed on entry or occupancy and this verbal explanation should be consistent with the limits as written on the placard. If you return to your property and find a RESTRICTED USE placard that does not adequately explain the limits of entry or use, you should contact the City Building Department for more specific information before entering the building.

When there is damage that is not a safety hazard but is detrimental to the quality of health or living conditions for long-term occupancy, a RESTRICTED USE placard may be posted. No occupancy or use restrictions would be stated, but the placard would note that the owner must correct the listed deficiencies under a permit.

In addition to posting the entire building, posting may be necessary at specific locations outside a building. In situations in which a potential falling hazard exists, the immediate area below that part of the building may be marked or otherwise barricaded with yellow tape having a message that reads *Do Not Enter, Danger, Caution, Restricted Area, Keep Out*, or similar cautionary wording. Damaged masonry chimneys, parapets, or veneers above outside spaces are examples of falling hazards requiring such barricading.

**INSPECTED Posting (Green Placard)**



Where damage is not observed, or does not pose any significant safety hazard, a green INSPECTED placard may be posted. This posting is intended only to inform occupants that the building may be safely occupied; it does not imply that existing damage should be ignored or that repairs are not necessary.

If the inspection team was not able to enter the building but found no hazards at the exterior, the INSPECTED placard will be marked “Exterior Only.” If the inspection team was also able to enter the building and found no hazards, the INSPECTED placard will be marked “Exterior and

Interior.” If you return to your building and find an INSPECTED placard marked “Exterior Only,” you should request a re-inspection by a City safety assessment team or building inspector if you believe there are hazards inside the building.

**Posting Changes**

It is possible that subsequent aftershocks could create new damage or increase the initial damage, causing the need for an INSPECTED or RESTRICTED USE posting to be changed to a more restricted level of use. If an aftershock has noticeably and substantially increased damage to your building, you should request a re-inspection by a City safety assessment team or building inspector. Typically, the Building Department will conduct safety assessments of posted buildings after a major aftershock, even if re-inspections are not requested by the owner.

Based on conditions found, the Rapid Evaluation safety assessment team may decide that a more extensive inspection is needed. They will post the building to their best judgment, but they will also request what is called a Detailed Evaluation. As time allows, buildings that have been posted UNSAFE or RESTRICTED USE postings by Rapid Evaluation teams often receive a Detailed Evaluation as a second opinion to ensure that the restrictions on your building use or property are appropriate. The Detailed Evaluation team will spend more time and have specialists to conduct a more thorough investigation that may result in a posting different from that given by the Rapid Evaluation team.

**Steps to Take to Ensure Damage Is Properly Repaired**

If your building is damaged in an earthquake and appears repairable, you will need to assess the damage, determine what efforts are necessary for re-occupancy, and begin these efforts. You will probably need the services of design and construction professionals and permits from the City Building Department. Your choice of which construction professional to initially contact will depend on your preliminary assessment of the repair and hazard mitigation needs, your knowledge and acquaintance with the local professionals, and their availability.

You should consider engaging design and construction professionals after you observe any significant damage to your building. You do not need to wait until City evaluations are completed. The City will often allow the entry and occupancy of a building when a registered design professional hired by the owner provides a reasonable written and signed hazard mitigation and occupancy safety plan for the building.

*“It is very important to understand that the “red tag” UNSAFE posting does not automatically mean that the property has been condemned or will require demolition.”*

Most architects, contractors, and engineers belong to either a regional or state association that can provide names, phone numbers, and perhaps some information on the type of work in which their members specialize. Recommendations are perhaps best sought from other individuals, business associates, family, friends, or neighbors who have recently used the services of the type of professional you are seeking. In certain cases, an engineering geologist may also be needed when a building site is steeply inclined or has certain soil conditions that must be considered in the repair design.

After reviewing the recommendations and availability of architects, contractors, or engineers, you can then begin the process of engaging them. When widespread damage occurs, the resulting demand for construction repairs may cause even legitimate local construction professionals to charge higher prices than would normally be expected. Obtaining several bids for the needed repair work can help secure a more reasonable price. Prior to signing any contract to perform repairs or other services, be sure that it contains a complete description of the scope of work and requires that a building permit be obtained. Contractors often require that a percentage of the full contract price be paid before beginning work, but it is generally neither necessary nor prudent to pay the entire amount in advance. For example, state law in California limits the advance payment that must be given to a contractor prior to beginning work to ten percent of the total contract price.



Permits will be needed from the City prior to beginning work, and obtaining them might be done by you or by the construction professionals you have engaged. The Building Department will be very busy after a major earthquake. The specific rules applying to the reconstruction or repair of your building may be somewhat different than those used in non-disaster situations so you should inquire with the Building Department about what rules apply to your

specific situation. There may be situations that require an older structure to be repaired using current standards for earthquake resistance rather than those used in the original construction. Use of these current methods can substantially reduce the damage caused by future earthquakes, but this will also usually raise the cost of the repair work.

In the aftermath of most disasters where large numbers of buildings are damaged or destroyed, there are likely to be opportunists posing as legitimate contractors willing to assist you in making needed repairs. The best way to avoid these unscrupulous or illegal operators is to ask for proof of both a current state contractor's license and a certificate of worker's compensation insurance. Although this evidence cannot necessarily ensure top quality workmanship, it certainly will avoid other problems that can result from using the services of either uninsured or unlicensed individuals.

If you are attempting to make repairs on your own without the help of contractors, be aware that you will still need a building permit or similar authorization and that you must request the required inspections for that work. Certain minor cosmetic work (e.g., replacing or patching cracked interior wall finish materials) may be exempted, but other repairs (e.g., fixing chimneys, or repairing any damaged structural members) will likely need a permit.

### **Guidelines for Securing Disaster Assistance**

The details, limitations, and eligibility requirements for various types of federal, state, or local aid cannot be specifically listed here, because they are subject to change and are often unique to the situation and the disaster. The best source for current information on these subjects will be the local disaster assistance center, which is typically established following a major disaster.

If earthquake-specific coverage is included in an insurance policy covering your property, your first step should be to contact the claims office of the insurance company. You may also be eligible to make a claim for federal or state assistance to cover uninsured losses or deductibles that may apply to your coverage. Whether or not insurance coverage applies to your losses, you should document all the visible damage with photographs and a narrative of what each photograph shows. Also, keep a record of the nature, extent, and cost of any emergency repairs made by yourself or others immediately after the earthquake and any other expenses related to the earthquake damage or the loss of use of the building. The importance of such documentation cannot be over-stressed, because the full amount of any insurance settlement or financial assistance that may be available in the form of low interest loans and, occasionally, grants, will require significant proof regarding damages, repairs, and expenses.

Damage to your home may be severe enough to require your family to relocate to temporary or even long-term alternative housing. Following a disaster, the local chapter of the American Red Cross is typically responsible for providing emergency shelters at locations such as schools. Information on the exact locations of shelters can be obtained from the Red Cross or local government authorities. Local nonprofit and community service organizations may also be providing aid including food and clothing, and state and county health departments may offer personal counseling.

If a presidential declaration of a disaster is made, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), or other cognizant federal agency, in conjunction with local government, will establish a local Disaster Assistance Center (DAC). These centers will normally begin functioning several days to a week after a disaster, and their locations will be announced by newspapers and other media. Representatives from local, state and federal agencies with disaster relief responsibility will be assigned to these centers.



FEMA, or other cognizant federal agencies, will address the needs of owners or tenants facing long-term displacement from their principal housing. This assistance can take several forms but often is provided by vouchers that cover a portion of the costs to obtain alternative existing housing. Business owners will be able to apply for loans from the federal Small Business Administration (SBA) at the Disaster Application Center. There is also a program for homeowners. These loans are normally made at below-market interest rates and can be applied to repairing or replacing a building; however, loan eligibility is based on the ability of the borrower to repay. To verify reported damages and assess the amount of financial assistance you may be eligible to receive, representatives from the jurisdiction processing your assistance claim will normally inspect your building.

**For more information contact the City of Sonoma Building Department by phone at 707-938 3681 or by e-mail at [building@sonomacity.org](mailto:building@sonomacity.org).**