

There is no justification for unequal distribution of relief funds to small Counties

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The California State Auditor last month published a report investigating the state's disbursement of the \$9.5 billion provided in the federal CARES Act's Coronavirus Relief Fund to counties. The report uncovered that large counties with more than 500,000 residents received nearly double the money per person than did small counties.

Contrary to the state's initial presumptions that less populous areas would be less affected by the coronavirus, the report further exposed that small counties had case rates equally high, if not higher, than large counties.

There was no justification for this unequal distribution of funds, cementing further the sentiment of distrust and unequal treatment many rural residents and local leaders have expressed to me in recent months. The state continues to favor large counties at the expense of rural Californians, and we are fed up.

Not only did large counties receive nearly double the amount per person than did small counties, but they also received these funds expeditiously, through a direct allocation from the federal government. Meanwhile, the 42 counties with fewer than 500,000 residents were forced to beg and plead with the governor to get their entitled funds.

While these counties were financially bleeding trying to keep up with the demands of COVID-19 response, the governor held their CRF dollars hostage in order to extort compliance with his COVID-19 guidelines. This further delayed the distribution of funds to the point that some rural counties received this money two months before the Dec. 31, expenditure date.

This was an issue of bipartisan concern on which I partnered with my colleagues across the aisle representing counties with fewer than 500,000 residents. In May 2020, I co-signed a bipartisan letter calling for Newsom to release the CRF funds directly to small counties who were desperate for funds, battling high case numbers and the financially devastating effects of the pandemic.

This call for aid fell on the governor's deaf ears and received no response from his administration. But this cold silence and unilateral decision-making is something my colleagues in the Legislature and I have become all too familiar with over the last 11 months.

From a governor who has continually touted that his administration will champion a "California for All," the state auditor's report tells a very different story. It exposes the unconscionable truth that some Californians received nearly double the CRF funds than others, depending on their zip code.