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U.S.

Los Angeles Asks Why Earthquake Alert System Didn't Warn Residents

Officials reassess threshold to alert public to quakes, as some ready for the 'Big One'



Two men examine a crack caused by an earthquake on Highway 178 in Ridgecrest, Calif. PHOTO: MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Jim Carlton, Ethan Millman and Erin Ailworth

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LOS ANGELES—In the aftermath of Friday's magnitude 7.1 earthquake felt throughout much of central and southern California, shaken residents are questioning whether they are prepared for a more dangerous one and why their phones didn't send any warning alerts.

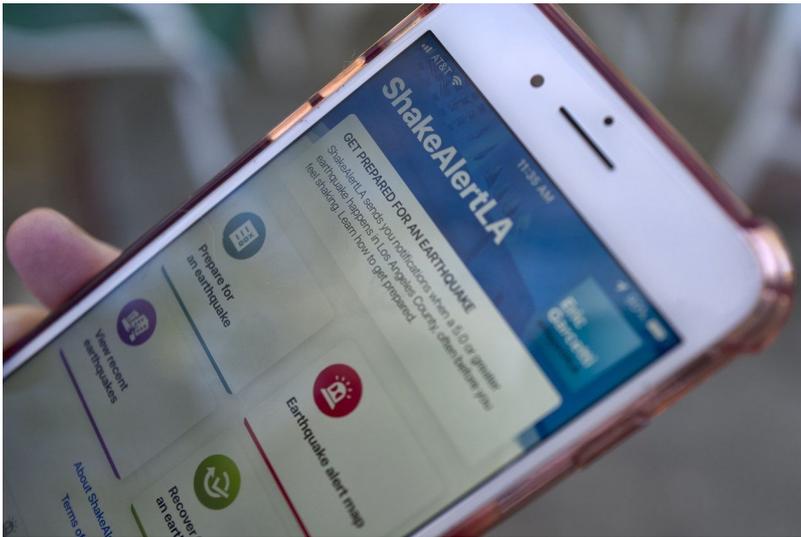
Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti unveiled the ShakeAlertLA app, the nation's first earthquake warning system available to the public, in January. Nearly 700,000 people have downloaded it to receive notifications based on their locations, according to officials.

But on Friday, when seats in Dodger Stadium vibrated and rides at Six Flags Magic Mountain theme park just north of L.A. shook, ShakeAlertLA did nothing, creating widespread frustration and confusion.

Alyssa Feller was being seated with her family at a restaurant in the L.A. suburb of Burbank on Friday night when she felt a jolt and saw a chandelier light fixture shaking. “I thought the app was broken, maybe not fully functioning,” said Ms. Feller. “Even if it gave a five-second warning, that would have been five seconds to find shelter or protection.”

In the hours following the quake, social media was full of screenshots of ShakeAlertLA devoid of any notifications.

Officials behind the app, which Los Angeles developed using seismic technology from the U.S. Geological Survey, said the shaking in Los Angeles County didn't reach the lowest threshold likely to result in major damage, equivalent to a magnitude 5.0 quake.



ShakeAlertLA didn't send any notifications Friday, when a magnitude 7.1 quake hit a remote area about 150 miles north of Los Angeles. PHOTO: RICHARD VOGEL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Seismologists say there is a danger of setting alerts too low, because people could get too accustomed to them and fail to take action when a major quake hits. California has 60 to 70 earthquakes a day, normally, and likely had hundreds of aftershocks on Monday, said Egill Hauksson, a geophysics professor at the California Institute of Technology's Seismological Laboratory. Nearly all are too small to be felt by humans.

“We are trying to strike a balance between the small earthquakes and the large earthquakes,” said Robert de Groot, coordinator for the USGS's ShakeAlert system.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Garcetti said the city is now working with the USGS to lower the threshold for users to receive alerts by the end of this month.

Officials at the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services say they will assess an identical threshold they have set for a statewide quake-alert system scheduled to be deployed by the end of the year. Notifications will be sent to mobile phones, similar to Amber alerts used for child abductions.

John Vidale, a seismology professor at the University of Southern California, said he expected to receive an alert based on the shaking in his L.A. home.

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“The blinds were swinging back and forth, you could hear the house creaking,” said Mr. Vidale, who had helped to deploy the early-warning technology.

In communities around the quake’s epicenter near the desert city of Ridgecrest, homes and roads were damaged and utilities disrupted, but there were no reported deaths or serious injuries.

Meanwhile, many Southern Californians scrambled to update earthquake preparedness plans left untouched in recent years. Sol Bash, who runs an emergency supplies business in L.A., said sales grew from almost nil to several thousand dollars a day since Friday.

“They always wanted to prepare, but it’s something you put off till tomorrow,” Mr. Bash said of his new customers.

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Californians are still awaiting what scientists often refer to as the “Big One,” a major earthquake that would cause widespread devastation in the seismically active San Francisco and Los Angeles areas. The state’s two most populous areas are linked by the San

Andreas Fault, an 800-mile stretch of the boundary between the Pacific and North American tectonic plates.

“It’s long, and a long one can host a very big earthquake,” said Nathan Niemi, a professor at the University of Michigan’s earth and environmental sciences department.

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