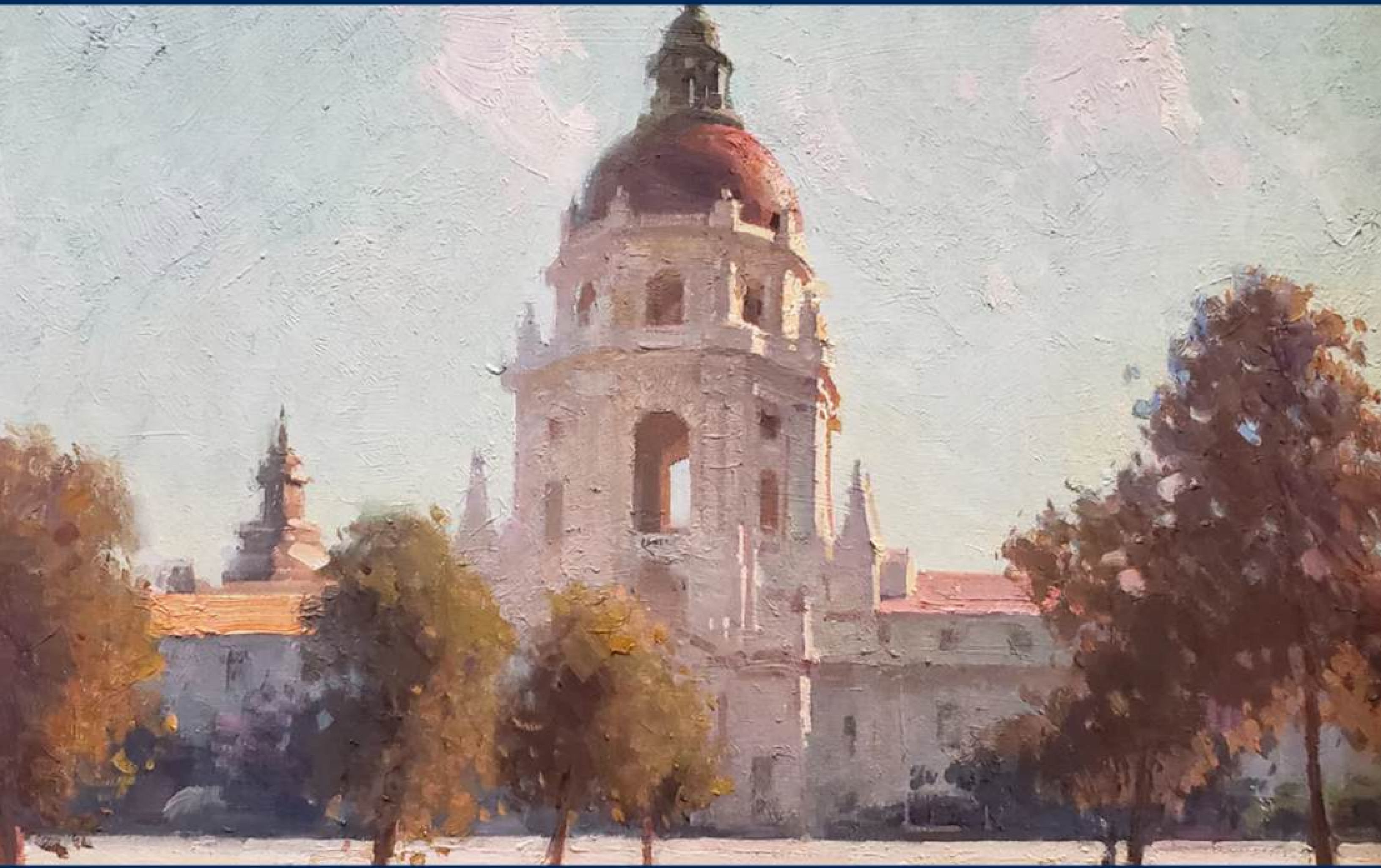
PASADENA POLICY REVIEW

Issue I | June 2026

PASADENA'S STUDENT-RUN POLICY PUBLICATION



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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

It is with the utmost passion that we share with you the *first ever* issue of Pasadena Forum's entirely student-run policy publication, Pasadena Policy Review(PPR). In many ways, PPR is not just a casual collection of evidence and hollow suggestions, it's an abject statement—a declaration of a most fundamental truth that the people who build this world–who sit in the high offices of grandiose government buildings, and stand behind the pulpit professing the problems of the world–are no different from you and me. That means we aren't restricted to the position of passive victims and witnesses in the landscape of horrid injustice. Rather, we can be the ones who actually *do something about it.*

Six months ago, Pasadena Forum was a novel idea in the heads of a group of friends sitting in a cafe, wondering why there wasn't a place on campus where we could truly question the world and its components. To fill that void, we decided to start the community we sought to be in, and foster the conversations we looked to be a part of. Over the past six months, the Forum has slowly shaped to fulfill its role as the area's only student-led nonpartisan think tank by organizing deep, thoughtful discussions and Pasadena City College's first Mock Supreme Court Competition.

We cannot express how grateful we are for all the advice and support we've received from our wonderful advisors, Dr. Azniv Mekhitarian and Professor Jacqueline Yu, as well as the instrumental and quite frankly inspirational aid of Alton Wang, Dr. Jose Gomez, Ken Chawkins, and Ryan Liu. We would also like to thank our colleagues and fellow board members who have been with us since the very beginning, and the Office of Student Life, our heroes in the shadows, who persistently and patiently aided us as we navigated the event planning process for the first time. Most importantly, we would like to extend our greatest appreciation to our members and writers, whose unique passions and perspectives truly make the Forum what it is.

At its core, Pasadena Forum was not, is not, and never will be an organization. It is never a club, a place, or an idea. *It is the people.* It is you, and it is I. Within each and everyone of us, there exists the potential to determine how we ought to live with each other, and how we ought to be. It is in that spirit that we push forth on our journey to uncover a social fabric that works for each and every one of us—an unwavering mission to build a better PCC, California, and step by step, a better world.

With deep gratitude,
Alan Alexander, Editor
Leah Castaneda, Editor

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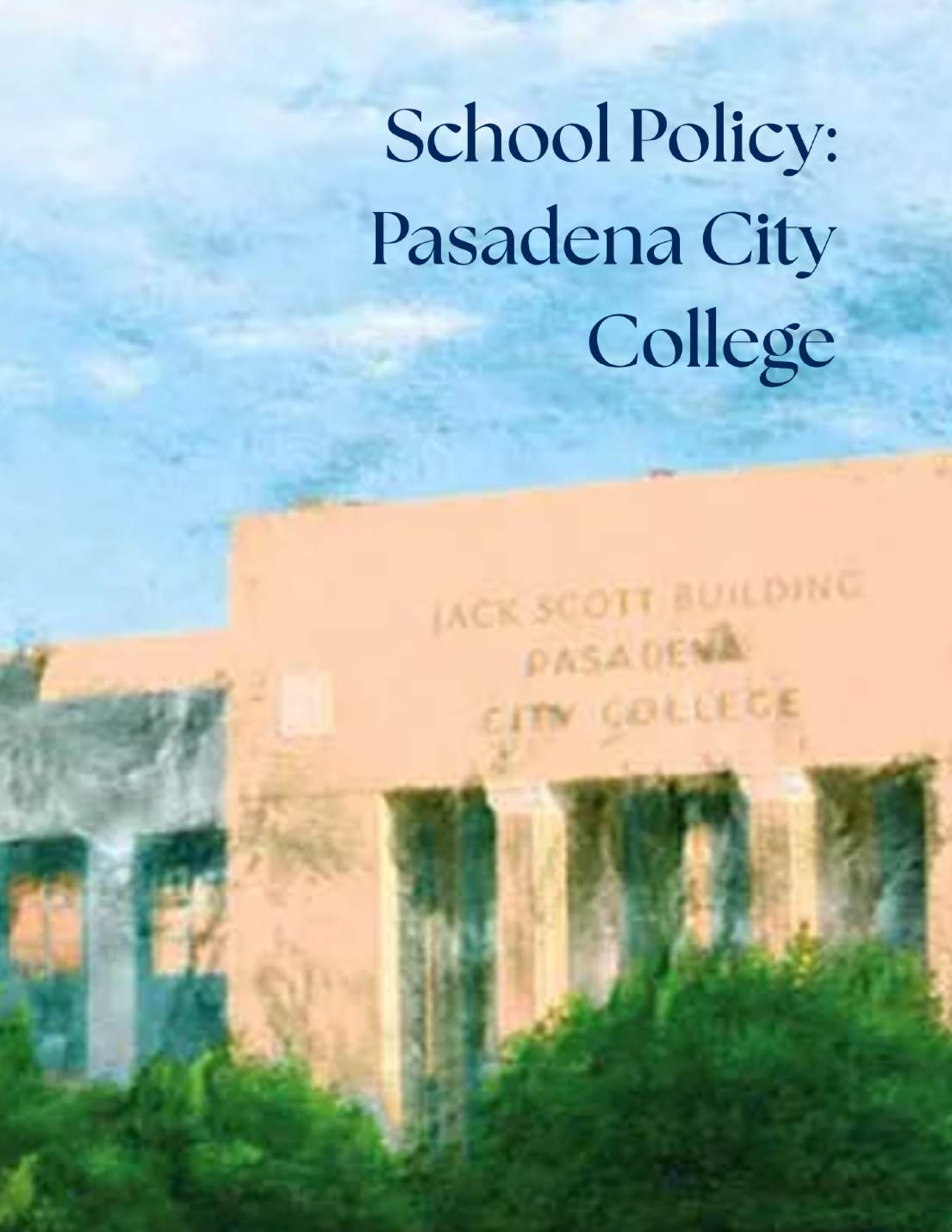
School Policy: Pasadena City College



Streamlining Accessibility for the Underrepresented: Reforming the Lancer Accessibility Resource Services Application at Pasadena City College

Olivia Omaya

Introduction:

The Lancer Accessibility Resource Services (LARS), available at Pasadena City College, provides accommodations and academic support for PCC's disabled student population[1]. These services are essential for ensuring equal educational opportunities amongst all students and assisting the disabled student population to succeed academically. Despite the overall strength of the existing program, the current application process creates unintentional barriers that bar the students it intends to serve from completely benefiting from these programs' support.

Background:

With the current process in place, LARS requires students to complete several steps before accommodations are granted. A separate application through the AIM portal must be completed, followed by the submission of official documentation verifying the student's disability, a significant wait time, and attendance at an intake appointment[2]. Although these preliminary steps are in place to maintain both organization and compliance, they also can create significant burdens for PCC's underrepresented disabled student population.

Students struggling with ADHD, anxiety, depression, learning disabilities, or executive functioning challenges may struggle with lengthy forms, scheduling appointments, obtaining medical documentation, and navigating the multiplatform application process, on top of outside responsibilities and academic/personal goals[3]. These barriers may contribute to the underutilization of disability services in higher education nationwide. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 70% of students with mental health disabilities are not registered to receive accommodations on campus[4]. Additionally, some low-income students may lack sufficient access to the healthcare or insurance necessary to supply updated documentation[5]. On top of these issues, LARS is heavily dependent on student self advocacy, leading to additional burdens of communication and persistence on those who are already barely staying afloat. These barriers could significantly delay students' abilities to receive necessary accommodations, leading to negatively impacted academic performance, course completion, and general quality of life[6].

Recommended Action:

In order to reform the application process to better suit its intended population, PCC should mend the LARS intake system to create a more accessible process. The first step in reforming this program, should be the implementation of a simplified initial-intake form requiring only basic identifying information, the student's accommodation concerns, and preliminary self-reporting. Additional documentation and more detailed information could be collected later after an initial student-mentor contact is established.

By granting temporary and limited accommodations, students would then be able to access immediate and supplementary academic support while completing the remaining intake requirements. These temporary accommodations could include, but are not limited to: short term assignment flexibility, provisional extended testing times, and access to lecture slides or lecture recordings. Accommodations would last a maximum of two weeks, or until the formal application is complete. This initial stepping stool would not only boost students' academic progress, but also act as an incentive for students to continue with the formal accommodation process rather than abandoning it due to the initial difficulty.

Additionally, LARS could potentially team up with Success Coaches from the First Year Experience center to provide greater guidance and support during an overwhelming application process. The program could also consider training students as peer mentors to provide this support, opening an avenue for student involvement and engagement on campus.

Conclusion:

Improving accessibility within the LARS program would better align with Pasadena City College's goals of student equity, inclusion, and student success. Accessibility doesn't just entail the existence of specific support services, but a realistic and efficient avenue for students to take full advantage of them. By reducing the existing barriers and simplifying the application process, PCC will not only create a more inclusive environment for their students, but also strengthen student self-confidence, involvement, and academic stability.

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Bridging Resource Awareness Gaps for the Underserved Student Population at Pasadena City College

Charm Pamintuan

Introduction:

Pasadena City College (PCC) provides many academic, financial, wellness, and career support services for its students. PCC's Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) conducted a survey in 2022 that found that many students are satisfied with these services, with 79% of respondents particularly expressing satisfaction in free tutoring support and 71% in emergency funding support[1].

However, despite the availability of these programs, awareness of them are uneven across PCC's student populations, especially the underserved student population who are not enrolled in traditional campus engagement structures such as First-Year Experience (FYE) and JAM. These populations may include parenting students, returning students, and even transfer-focused students outside FYE structures. The question of how PCC can best serve its students therefore does not lie in whether the school offers enough support, but whether the current outreach systems at PCC effectively reach those who could stand benefit the most from these services.

Background:

Multiple OIE surveys reveal gaps in student awareness. According to PCC's Fall 2021 Student Survey, many students reported not using services such as CORE*, EOP&S**, DSPS***, the Office of Student Life, and the International Student Center because they were unaware these services even existed[2]. Approximately 25% of students reported they did not know about the CORE program, while 20% reported they did not know about EOP&S[2]. Additional survey findings further support this concern. In a Fall 2023 survey regarding the Freeman Center for Career and Completion, approximately 39% of respondents stated they were unaware that the Freeman Center could help students obtain employment opportunities, while 43% did not know where the center was physically located on campus despite 77% of students stating that they do have career goals[3]. These findings demonstrate that a severe lack of awareness exists despite strong student interest in internships, mentoring opportunities, and networking events.

Furthermore, current outreach methods may not fully align with the schedules and responsibilities of many students. According to the 2021 survey, many students reported working substantial hours weekly, including significant portions of students working 20-40+ hours per week[6]. Additionally, approximately 39% of respondents reported being responsible for caregiving or family obligations[6]. Students balancing employment or caregiving responsibilities may be less likely to attend in-person outreach events or engage with traditional onboarding programs. Parenting students particularly illustrate this gap: only 24% reported seeing references to parenting accommodations or student-parent resources within course syllabi, while many students were unsure whether such information had been included at all[6].

As many students remain unaware of available services, examining PCC's outreach methods becomes increasingly important. An astounding 74% of students identified email as the best communication method for student support services; 34% of students reported learning about PCC support services through instructors while 33% cited PCC websites or social media[2]. In comparison, only 10% cited counselors and

*Community Overcoming Recidivism through Education
**Extended Opportunity Programs & Services
***Disabled Student Programs & Services

2% cited flyers or campus signage[2]. These findings suggest that repeated and asynchronous communication methods may better align with the needs of PCC's current student population than outreach systems centered primarily around physical campus engagement. In a more recent OIE survey, 36% of respondents answered that the college is not very effective at outreach[4]. Even amongst regularly evaluated student satisfaction with support services, there evidently is a much lower satisfaction rate with the way PCC promotes these services. As a result, resource awareness remains an important equity issue.

Recommended Action:

PCC should implement a more centralized and recurring outreach infrastructure to improve awareness of student support services for underserved students. One potential approach would be the development of an asynchronous resource module integrated through the student portal, Lancer Point. Unlike traditional orientation systems which focus on first-year students, this outreach structure would provide continuing access to information for returning, parenting, or any underserved student throughout their time at PCC.

The module could include information regarding:

- health, counseling, and wellness services
- EOP&S
- DSPS
- emergency financial assistance
- tutoring and Success Centers, including accessible location and navigation tools
- career development resources
- parenting student services (CalWORKs)

Other potential actions PCC could consider include regular semester-wide resource reminder emails, standardized resource statements within syllabi or within Canvas course modules, or a centralized hub for resources within LancerLife.

Conclusion:

PCC already offers extensive support resources, and many students report positive experiences with them. However, survey data suggests that awareness gaps still exist, particularly for underserved students. Current outreach systems rely on in-person or first-year based engagement, which can leave some students unaware of available support services; implementing asynchronous, recurring, and centralized outreach would improve equitable awareness and access to existing resources across *all* of PCC's student populations.

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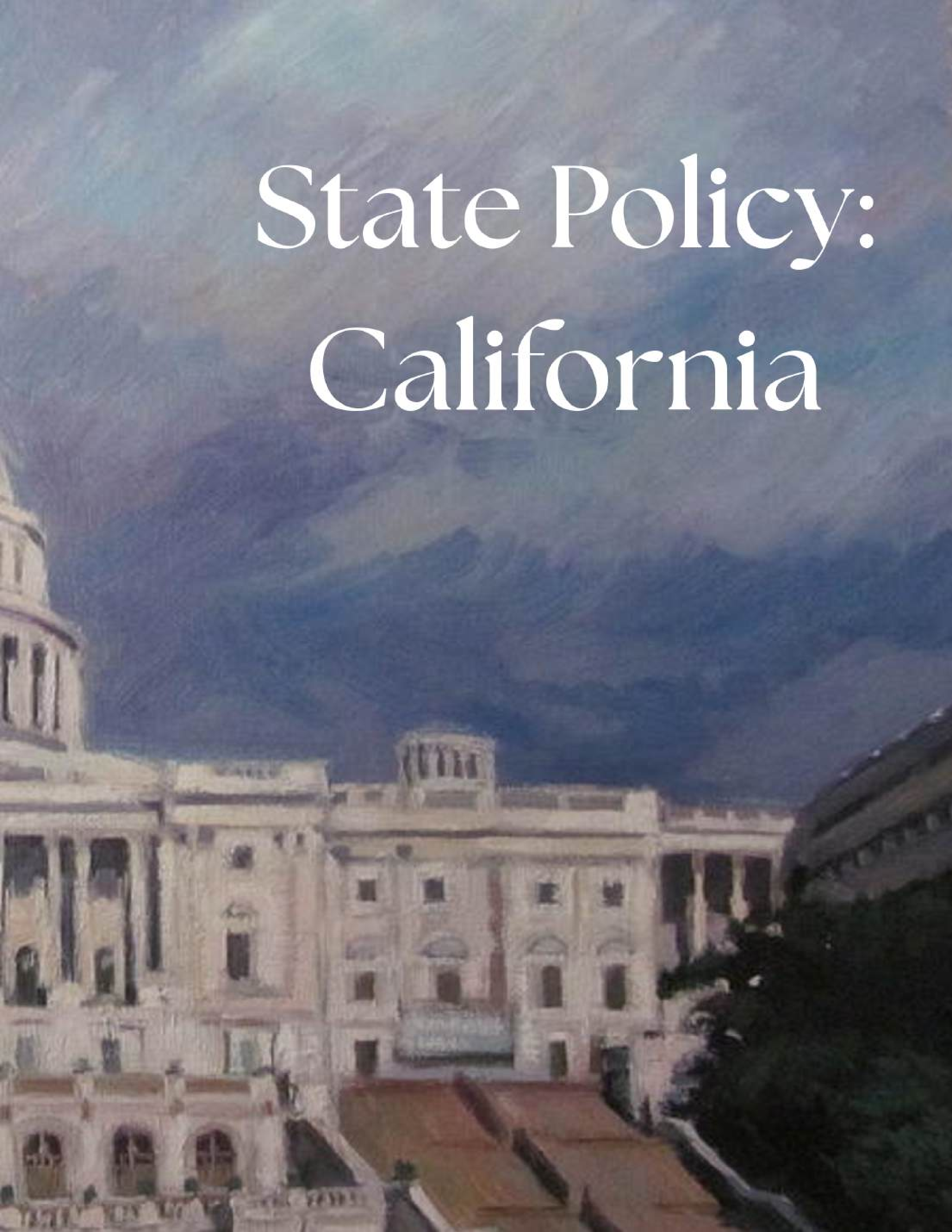
State Policy: California



Incentivizing the Implementation of Home-hardening Hardware for Wildfire Mitigation and Risk Reduction

Alan Alexander

Introduction:

The 2025 Eaton and Palisades fires were some of the most devastating fires in the state's history. One study found that estimated economic damages alone were reportedly $275 billion and losses from insurers amounted to around $30 billion[1]. These impacts affected everyone, from homeowners to small businesses and local governments, and their personal struggles really unveiled on an experiential level the daunting reality of California's wildfire crisis. The introduction of a state tax-cut measure for home-hardening infrastructure would greatly incentivise residents to build safer, sustainable, and more fire-resistant properties.

Background:

Risk of wildfire within the state is now 98% higher than all other states in the country[2], and with such high risk, it is not only the consequences of the horrid past that lingers, but concern for California's future.

Because of this immense risk, insurance giants like State Farm have deemed it unsustainable to provide full services in the state, declaring in 2023 that they were no longer accepting new applications for property and casualty insurance in California[3]. As a result of these decisions, many residents found it much more difficult to find and access quality policies that would protect them in the long run from further damage and catastrophe.

Even factoring in that major insurers weren't accepting newcomers into their client base, current customers still face a plethora of issues with payout processes and other timely services they pay for. A recent survey found that 4 in 10 California residents face insurability issues, whether from dropped coverage or outrageous premium increases[4]. Furthermore, in order to function more sustainably, State Farm and other insurers like Allstate have requested an average of a whopping 30-50% insurance premium increases[5].

In the midst of this safety and insurance crisis, two avenues realistically present themselves to be explored: either establish harsh building restrictions that would require mass modification to new and existing properties in high fire-risk areas; OR raise the amount that insurers can charge clients for policies. This brief aims to explore a rather unorthodox approach to the former.

Recommended Action:

The primary recommended action is to introduce a measure at the state level that would exempt home hardware products that meet certain fire-risk reduction requirements from sales tax *entirely*. In doing so, the measure would provide greater monetary incentive to those building new homes or modifying existing ones, without abruptly imposing harsh new restrictions that could be unrealistic to implement.

Already, the state exempts items it deems as necessities, such as consumable food, diesel fuel, and farm machinery[6]. Infrastructure that would help California mitigate the crippling effects of imminent natural disasters and subsequently avoid long-term economic disrepair would no doubt fall under this category of "necessity." Furthermore, incentivizing residents to harden homes through sales-tax cuts would arguably be much more effective than the grants and rebates the state currently offers. Doing so would remove the barrier to entry and inaccessibility of the lengthy forms and bureaucratic processes included in applying for these forms of aid.

One prime example of an item that would immensely benefit from sales tax exemption is tempered glass dual-pane windows, which provide significant protection against flames and wind-blown embers[7]. These windows cost an average of roughly $1000 per window, whereas regular windows only cost around $500-700. Therefore, a sales tax exemption would greatly narrow the price gap between these two products from a heavy half a grand to a much lighter couple hundred dollars, leading to more sales and a potential self-propagating effect through economies of scale.

Conclusion:

A tax-exemption measure for the state's sales tax shows immense promise in helping to push California's fire disaster crisis forward. Not only would the measure provide greater incentive to residents to harden their homes, but it would also be more accessible and effective to implement, creating a more sustainable future for California in the decades to come.

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The Issue with 'Bite Size' Democracy: Remedying the Inequities Within California's Policy Initiative System

Leah Castaneda

Introduction:

California's model of direct democracy is deeply flawed. Ballot qualification measures pose a barrier that cannot be reasonably surmounted by citizen initiative groups. In its current state, the initiative process requires millions of dollars in campaign financing—a requirement that is well within the capacity of corporations and special interest groups, but is out of reach for the 'common man'. Reform of California's initiative system is needed, but providing immediate support to citizens' interests must come first. The creation of a state fund which provides aid to citizen initiatives would be the first measure towards balancing the structural inequities within the initiative process, and allow average citizens a fighting chance within the political arena.

Background:

In 2016, Prop 61 proposed a measure that would put a cap on prescription drug prices by requiring state agencies to pay no more than the price offered to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs[1]. Despite receiving prior voter support, demonstrated in polls conducted by Stanford's Hoover Institution (51% support)[1], USC Dornsife (66% support)[1], and Tulchin Research (73% support)[2], the initiative failed to pass. Our direct democratic model, in theory, should not support this kind of election outcome, where the results of an election do not align with what was demonstrated in the popular interests. However, an analysis of Prop 61's respective support and opposition campaigns seem to indicate that the greatest predictor of a ballot initiative's success is not the amount of public support it receives, but the amount of money spent on a campaign. The "Yes on Prop 61" campaign was backed by $19.3 million raised by a handful of non-profit organizations and medical workers unions, while the "No on prop 61" campaign was backed by $109.1 million and funded entirely by a selection of various biopharmaceutical corporations[3].

The professionalized network of lobbyists, petitioning firms, and political consultants, otherwise known as the initiative industrial complex, currently provides the means for corporate interests to propagate and maintain their coercive influence over California's system of 'direct democracy'. Increasing professionalization has pushed the average cost for qualifying an initiative onto the ballot to $8.46 million as of 2024[3]. The largest portion of initial campaign costs come from signature gathering; with an average cost per required signature estimated at $15.08[3] and the required number of signatures being equal to 5% of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election, or 546,651 signatures if based on the year 2024[4]. Included in this is an additional $2000 submittance fee which must be paid before a ballot initiative can be approved for circulation[4]. The issue in need of immediate attention is not the existence of money in politics, as this issue has been addressed previously by the Supreme Court of the United States in the case of Citizens United v. FEC, and is an unavoidable byproduct of the competitive nature of democracy. What must be addressed is the amount of citizen coalition required to raise enough to cover exorbitant campaign costs being grossly disproportionate to the level of effort required of corporate groups which have large sums of money already at their disposal. A system of direct democracy, such as California's model of initiative and referendum, only works if everyday citizens are able to effectively coalesce and come to their own consensus about the proper way to address policy issues. If this consensus is not given a guaranteed place in the state's legislation–and is so easily snuffed out by the interests of overly financed actors–then this system cannot call itself democratic, "directly" or otherwise.

Recommended Action:

To counteract the structural inequities inherent to our 'pay-to-play' initiative system, the state of California should create a public fund dedicated to supporting citizen-led ballot initiatives through campaign financing grants.

Public campaign financing(PCF) has seen success in various parts of the U.S. including municipalities in Virginia, Arizona, and Maine[5]; though the current implementation of these "clean election" programs have focused solely on electoral candidate campaigns, and has not yet been applied to supporting campaigns within the initiative and referendum electoral system. The state of California should be the first to apply PCF to citizen ballot initiatives, specifically following the model most recently implemented in New York State as this new model has shown improvements in the diversity of campaign donors, increases in small-donor participation, and improved the feelings of political efficacy amongst the constituent voter base[6].

New York's statewide program follows a small-donor matching model, which multiplies campaign contributions made by regular citizen donors by matching the first $250 of each donation given by a 6:1 ratio[7]. Under this program, an eligible $100 donation would be matched with $600 of public funds, coming to a total of $700. Larger donations are not amplified to the same extent, as a $1000 donation would only be matched for the first $250 and receive no more than $1500 in matching state funds. Contributions exceeding $1050 would not be matched at all, to further insulate the distribution of state funds from 'big-spending' donors. Additional features of the program would include a cap of $10 million of public funds awarded to each qualifying campaign, and requirement of all participating initiative campaigns to be subject to regular audits by the Fair Political Practices Commission.

An obvious concern regarding the implementation of PCF into the funding of ballot initiative campaigns is the fiscal feasibility of a state program which awards donor-matching grants equal to upwards of a few million dollars per campaign. However, funding an effective "clean election" financing program in California is highly feasible, as it would require only 1% of the revenue collected from corporate and capital gains taxes[8]. Not only is the creation of a statewide PCF fund possible, it is a necessary step toward greater structural reform, and will only act to amplify the effectiveness of small-donor participants–a group that has not traditionally been allowed to effectively participate in politics due to the overwhelming influence of corporate interest groups.

Conclusion:

If the issue of corporate dominance within California's policy initiative system is not solved, 'common' citizen interests will continue to be underrepresented and corporations will be allowed to protect and propagate their interests through unfettered access to our state legislative system. The initiative industrial complex is too useful and too lucrative to dissolve by itself, therefore the issue must be addressed directly. The solution for today is public campaign financing, and some day in the future structural reform.

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Rebuilding California's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund: Reforming a 1983 Safety Net for a Modern Economy

Patrick Lenzotti

Introduction:

California's Unemployment Insurance (UI) system has been insolvent in every recession since 1980. Currently, California is the only state still carrying unpaid federal UI loan debt from the pandemic, with the balance projected to reach nearly $22 billion in 2025 and possibly $23.2 billion by 2026[1]. This crisis stems from four decades of legislative inaction on a financing structure unchanged since 1983, and from experiencing the nation's largest pandemic-related fraud losses.

If left unaddressed, California will enter the next recession with an empty UI trust fund, automatic federal tax penalties on every employer in the state, and billions of dollars in interest payments that will crowd out spending on housing, healthcare, and education. This brief proposes a two-part reform strategy: (1) raise the taxable wage base and (2) adopt a forward-funded reserve model.

Background:

California's UI program is administered by the Employment Development Department (EDD) and funded through payroll taxes on employers, as mandated by the State Unemployment Tax Act (SUTA). The fundamental issue is that California's taxable wage base, the portion of each employee's wages subject to UI taxes, has been frozen at $7,000 since 1983 and has never been adjusted for inflation or wage growth. As a result, employers pay UI taxes on just 8 to 12 percent of the average California worker's actual earnings, the smallest share in the nation[2]. By comparison, Washington State taxes $67,600 per employee, and Oregon taxes $50,900. This structural gap has starved the trust fund of revenue even during periods of economic growth, ensuring that California entered the COVID-19 pandemic with no meaningful reserve.

When the pandemic began in March 2020, EDD was overwhelmed. An estimated $20 billion, or 11% of UI benefits, was lost to fraud, the largest reported amount of any state[3]. At the same time, many legitimate claimants faced long payment delays. In January 2026, the State Auditor added EDD to the High-Risk Audit Program, underscoring ongoing systemic failures[3].

To cover legitimate claims, California borrowed from the federal UI loan program. Employers now face escalating Federal Unemployment Tax Act (FUTA) credit reductions, an automatic tax penalty that compounds each year the debt remains unpaid. The Legislative Analyst's Office documented insolvency risks in the UI fund as early as 2012, yet the Legislature has failed to act in every recovery since[4]. Governor Newsom vetoed SB 799 in 2023, which would have modestly expanded UI benefits, citing the state's precarious fiscal position[5].

The burden of this failure falls hardest on those least able to carry it. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, younger workers make up 54.3 percent of UI recipients, and individuals without a high school diploma account for 53.4 percent, populations with the fewest financial reserves and the greatest dependence on timely benefits[6]. Beyond claimants, all Californians are affected through the diversion of General Fund dollars away from essential services to cover UI debt interest.

Recommended Action:

The following two reforms are grounded in the December 2024 analysis of the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO)[4] and draw on successful models from Oregon and Washington State.

1.Raise and Index the Taxable Wage Base

The Legislature should raise California's SUTA taxable wage base from $7,000 to a level consistent with the LAO's December 2024 recommendations, phased in over three to four years to moderate the near-term impact on employers. The wage base should then be indexed to the California Average Weekly Wage going forward to prevent another decades-long freeze. This is the most consequential structural fix available: it expands the revenue base that funds benefits without requiring an increase in the tax rate itself. States like Washington and Oregon have already demonstrated that an adequately funded wage base produces a solvent trust fund without driving businesses out of state[7].

2. Adopt a Forward-Funded Reserve Model and Retire the Federal Debt

The Legislature should codify a minimum reserve adequacy standard using the High-Cost Multiple metric[3], which measures current reserves against the worst historical year of benefit outflows. The U.S. Department of Labor recommends a minimum High-Cost Multiple of 1.0; California has chronically fallen below this threshold[1]. A statutory floor, with automatic contribution adjustments triggered when reserves fall below 0.5, would institutionalize fiscal discipline and break the cycle of crisis borrowing. Alongside this, the Legislature should authorize a one-time General Fund transfer to begin retiring the outstanding $21 to $22 billion federal debt and halt the compounding interest drain on public resources[1].

Conclusion:

California cannot sustain a modern economy on a safety net designed for 1983. Without reform, the state will enter the next recession with no UI reserves, rising employer taxes, diminished benefits for workers, and billions more in interest costs taken from education, housing, and healthcare. The evidence for action is overwhelming and comes from the state's own institutions. The LAO identified this crisis over a decade ago, the State Auditor has flagged EDD as a high-risk institution, and California remains the only state in the nation still carrying unpaid pandemic-era UI debt.

The two reforms proposed here are not untested ideas. They are the standard practices of states that have already solved this problem. Raising the taxable wage base and building an adequate reserve are achievable within the current legislative session with sufficient political will from Sacramento. The Legislature has the evidence, the tools, and the obligation to act before the next downturn forecloses the option.

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