

SPECIAL FEATURE: INNOVATION



Legal Aid in the Wake of Disaster: Lessons from the Eaton and Palisades Wildfires

By *Diego Cartagena, President & CEO,¹ Bet Tzedek Legal Services and Kate Marr, Executive Director,² Community Legal Aid SoCal*

Legal aid organizations play a vital but often overlooked role in disaster recovery. In Southern California, Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County



Diego Cartagena (L); Kate Marr (R).

(NLSLA) and the Disaster Legal Assistance Collaborative (DLAC) have long been leaders in this space, offering models of coordinated, trauma-informed legal response. Their work became especially critical during the Eaton and Palisades wildfires of 2025.

NLSLA's disaster work began after the 1994 Northridge Earthquake, when it pioneered a model of embedding legal advocates in disaster recovery centers (DRC). This approach—combining direct services, government collaboration, and systemic advocacy—has since become the national standard. Over the years, NLSLA has responded to major disasters including the Woolsey Fire, Hurricane Katrina, the Creek Fire, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Through its Disaster Assistance Project, NLSLA has provided free legal help on matters ranging from Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Small Business Administration (SBA) aid applications to tenant protections, insurance issues, and access to education for displaced students.

The organization also invests in training attorneys and volunteers in trauma-informed response, with a strong emphasis on language access and equity. As one of only eleven legal aid organizations to receive federal disaster funding, NLSLA's model offers a blueprint for legal aid in climate-related crises.

DLAC, meanwhile, is a statewide alliance of legal aid organizations, law firms, government agencies, and local bar associations. Formed over a decade ago with support from Morrison & Foerster, the State Bar of California, the Legal Aid Association of California (LAAC), and the ABA Young Lawyers Division, DLAC was created to ensure survivors of disasters have access to legal help. Its collaborative model enables rapid deployment of legal resources, including staffing Disaster Recovery Centers and hosting legal clinics. Prior to 2025, DLAC had supported responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and wildfires like the CZU Lightning Complex and North Complex, while also developing training materials and coordinating pro bono efforts.

When the Eaton and Palisades fires broke out, legal aid organizations faced a complex landscape. The fires were geographically distant—27 miles apart—and fell under different jurisdictions, with Eaton in Los Angeles County and Palisades in the City of Los Angeles. The communities affected were

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also socioeconomically and demographically distinct. Palisades was predominantly white and affluent, with a median income of \$325,000 and a high homeownership rate. Vulnerable populations included renters and seniors, particularly those in rent-controlled units. Eaton, or Altadena, had a median income of \$129,000 but with stark inequality. A quarter of households earned less than \$65,000, and Black homeowners—who had a high homeownership rate — faced significant cost burdens, with many spending over 30% of their income on housing. Seniors made up a substantial portion of the population, especially among Black homeowners.

These disparities shaped legal needs and equity concerns in recovery efforts. Survivors faced a wide range of legal challenges. Many homeowners discovered they were underinsured, and legal aid organizations were called upon to help challenge denied or delayed insurance claims. Rent gouging emerged as a serious issue, with several landlords raising rents by 25–50%, in violation of California’s anti-price-gouging laws. Legal aid groups led litigation to protect displaced renters. Tenants also faced evictions and unsafe living conditions due to fire damage, while survivors struggled to access FEMA aid, unemployment benefits, and mental health services. In Palisades, the destruction of rent-controlled units sparked debates over affordable housing and displacement, requiring legal advocates to fight to ensure equitable redevelopment. Small business owners and their employees needed help navigating insurance issues and returning to damaged commercial spaces. Family law concerns also surfaced, with fears of increased domestic violence and custody disputes due to displacement related stress. Additionally, legal aid offices remained vigilant against labor trafficking, which often spikes after natural disasters.

The legal aid organizations seeking to tackle this complex picture were part of an already strained legal

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services sector. Coming out of COVID-19, agencies were still reeling from the increased demand for services. Added to this stress was the already overwhelming tsunami of federal policy changes impacting our communities, and a justice gap that, according to the California State Bar’s most recent study and reports shows that for each legal aid attorney in the state, there are over 4,000 eligible clients. Budgets were also being strained, particularly at the local level, with the end of COVID-19 related funding.

Despite the challenges, legal aid staff rallied and rolled up their sleeves in an effort to assist. More than twenty legal aid organizations from across Southern California convened a Zoom call the Friday after the fires, building on their habit of monthly virtual meetings. The initial goals were modest: identify key legal issues, determine which organizations could address them, and share information. NLSLA was identified as a natural leader, given its experience with disaster response. As NLSLA outlined the legal issues, agencies offered their expertise and capacity to provide services ranging from Know Your Rights presentations to direct representation and impact litigation. All agreed to make materials open source, allowing others to use them freely in their own efforts to meet the community’s needs.

To coordinate efforts, the group turned to a SharePoint site already used by the CEO network. This platform offered a spreadsheet to track organizational roles, a document library, a newsfeed for alerts, and a calendar for events. Initially, this low-barrier infrastructure helped streamline communication. Group leaders were asked to fill the spreadsheet in themselves, and CEOs were given the ability to deputize a member of their staff to help fill out the spreadsheet and save documents.

As relief efforts became more sophisticated and complex, this simple infrastructure became insufficient, however, and gaps in data started to grow into fissures that threatened to destabilize matters. As everyone knows, data use and utility depend on data integrity. Unfortunately, the spreadsheet was completed by only a handful of organizations. This created significant knowledge gaps when it came to coordinating among agencies. For example, while Community Legal Aid So Cal volunteered to serve as the intake hub for all fire-impacted community members, the staff who agreed to serve in this capacity had an incomplete picture of where to refer these community members to because of gaps in the spreadsheet.

Moreover, while the SharePoint also contained

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Continued from page 11

a basic yet functional calendar feature, a very small number of organizations were using the calendar, resulting in knowledge gaps among organizations as to what events were happening across the county and whether there was a need for staff from organizations to attend the events. On more than one occasion, an organizing legal aid would express surprise, and some level of frustration, over the lack of space at a DRC resulting from one too many legal aid organizations signing up to help staff the DRC. At least one component of this data management issue was a failure to coordinate among the holders of the data. The initial Friday Zoom call had turned into a weekly call, but the attendees tended to be the agency CEOs, despite the fact that many organizations had deputized their pro bono coordinators to help manage their internal efforts. This resulted in a knowledge gap at the CEO level, with “I don’t know, I’ll have to check with our pro bono director” being a constant refrain during the weekly Zoom calls.

DLAC’s absence was keenly felt. Despite its foundational work, DLAC’s coordination capacity had diminished due to funding cuts, leaving Southern California agencies to operate independently in the early weeks. Fortunately, Legal Services of Northern California stepped in, with Jennifer Anders-Gable joining the effort and LSNC covering costs. Her support helped design and coordinate Disaster Recovery Centers and clarify legal issues. With her involvement, DLAC began to reemerge as a central player. Community Legal Aid SoCal took on intake responsibilities, and Inland Counties Legal Services offered to maintain and expand the DLAC website, signaling a potential revival of its coordinating role.

The Eaton and Palisades wildfires underscored both the critical importance and the fragility of coordinated legal aid in disaster response. Southern California’s legal aid organizations mobilized quickly, but the experience revealed gaps in infrastructure, data management, and communication. It also highlighted the need for sustained investment in coordination mechanisms like DLAC. As climate-related disasters become more frequent, legal aid organizations must be equipped not only to respond but to collaborate

effectively. The lessons from 2025 offer a roadmap for strengthening disaster legal aid—ensuring that equity, access, and justice remain central to recovery efforts.

- 1 Diego Cartagena is the President & CEO of Bet Tzedek, where he has dedicated his legal career to advancing access to justice. Since joining the organization in 2012, he has launched and expanded groundbreaking programs, including the Small Business Legal Academies, the Preventing and Ending Homelessness Project, and the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status program. His leadership has strengthened Bet Tzedek’s partnerships with law firms, corporations, and community organizations, bringing vital legal services to thousands across Los Angeles. Aproud “Double Bruin,” Diego earned both his B.A. and J.D. from UCLA, with a concentration in Critical Race Studies. He currently serves on the boards of the National Legal Aid & Defender Association and Justice in Aging, and in 2025 was elected to the prestigious Los Angeles Chancery Club for his professional excellence, civic leadership, and public service. Diego may be reached at DCartagena@bettzedek.org.
- 2 Kate Marr is the Executive Director at Community Legal Aid SoCal (CLA SoCal), a non-profit legal aid agency with a staff of 150 serving Orange and Los Angeles Counties. Kate is a proud legal-aid lifer, having spent her entire 25-year career in legal services. Immediately prior to joining CLA SoCal, Kate was a managing attorney at Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) where she supervised the organization’s family law and immigration work and the Greater Long Beach Medical-Legal Partnership. Kate received her JD from the University of Colorado School of Law and her undergraduate degree from Bryn Mawr College. Outside of work, Kate is an avid hiker, yogi, and unicorn enthusiast. Kate may be reached at kmarr@clsocal.org.

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