

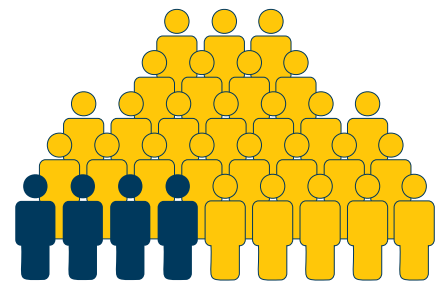
REBUILDING LIVES:

Disaster Response and Recovery
for Older Adults and People
with Disabilities in California

NOVEMBER 2025

WILDFIRE

The devastating impact of the January 2025 wildfires in Los Angeles (LA) County cannot be overstated. The Eaton and Palisades fires, the most destructive of the blazes, burned more than 37,000 acres, destroyed over 18,000 structures, and claimed at least 31 lives. Of the 31 identified victims, all but four were over age 65 or had a disability, with a median age of 76.



The disparate impact the LA County fires had on older adults and people with disabilities provided an insight into a harsh reality plaguing California's emergency planning. That is, vulnerable populations are still disproportionately victims of natural disasters. And after the immediate danger of a natural disaster has concluded, many older adults and people with disabilities lag in the recovery process.

TESTIMONY

The California Commission on Aging (CCoA) held an informational hearing in May 2025 to gain insight into the issues surrounding older adults and emergency response and recovery. The hearing, titled *Recovering Together: Rebuilding Life After the Fires*, took place at the Braille Institute in Los Angeles. The Commission heard testimony from three panels of experts—many of whom were directly involved in response efforts to the LA fires—and received public comments. Testimony highlighted the challenges facing the communities of Altadena and Pacific Palisades, what may be expected in the near future, and how state and local government can better prepare for the next disaster.

THE REPORT

On November 5, 2025, CCoA released a report, *REBUILDING LIVES: Disaster Response and Recovery for Older Adults and People with Disabilities in California*, based on the expert testimony from the hearing and additional research. This policy brief is a summary of the longer paper. [Read the full paper here.](#)

FINDINGS

Complications at the Onset of the Fires

Disasters often present similar challenges for older adults, and the Los Angeles wildfires were no exception. By understanding these common challenges and the specific issues that arose during the fires' initial outbreak, we can better prepare for future disasters. These challenges included:

- Emergency alerts are not accessible to all.
- Limited mobility hinders evacuation during disasters.
- Older adults often lack advance evacuation planning.
- Emergency response systems lack data on vulnerable residents.
- Communication issues hinder appropriate care.



Evacuation Centers During the Eaton Fire

Firsthand accounts from the Eaton fire evacuation centers highlight the complications older adults face once evacuated. These challenges included:

- Jurisdictional issues plagued coordination.
- Critical equipment was missing.
- Local health systems needed time to mobilize.
- Emergency agencies did not coordinate with aging resources.

Older Adults Face Longer Recovery

Older adults face additional barriers when returning to their lives after a disaster, highlighting previously unnoticed disparities. The Commission found:

- Navigating insurance can be overwhelming.
- Those with reverse mortgages face financial ruin when losing a home.
- Loss of long-term care facilities disrupts continuity of services.
- Temporary changes can interrupt long-term care services.
- Effectuated residents face difficulty replacing durable medical equipment.
- Behavioral health challenges can intensify in recovery.
- Disaster related scams often target older adults.
- Older adults often lack access to legal resources.
- Infrastructure rebuilt after disaster frequently lacks accessible design.

Preparing for the Future

As recovery continues, the long-term effects of the Los Angeles fires on older adults remain unclear. Insights from past disasters and ongoing analyses can help plan for their future needs, including:

- Widespread loss of housing has a long term impact.
- Emerging environmental concerns create new challenges.
- Community led organization networks support recovery.
- Agencies are unlikely to be prepared for other disasters.



RECOMMENDATIONS

CCoA has compiled the following recommendations to strengthen disaster response, recovery, and preparedness for older adults and people with disabilities.

Local Administrative Actions	State Administrative Actions	Legislative Actions
Pre-designate emergency evacuation sites in emergency plans	Explore the establishment of a disaster registry	Establish a state Long-Term Care Mutual Aid System
Coordinate disaster response with local aging & disability organizations	Launch CA Department of Justice Task Force on disaster scams	Provide disaster preparedness funding to AAAs & Independent Living Centers
Ensure older adult representation on planning boards	Reestablish a disaster recovery housing aid program	Develop a State Disaster Legal Services Fund
	Amplify Access and Functional Needs Emergency Training	Require reverse mortgage servicers to provide counseling referrals

CONCLUSION

Moving forward, it is critical to enact policies and advocate for change on this urgent issue. As California continues to experience increasingly devastating natural disasters and as our population ages, we must ensure that older adults and people with disabilities have a voice in emergency planning and response. CCoA remains dedicated to uplifting these voices and ensuring they are heard.



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