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PRESS RELEASE

California Commission on Aging

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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DATE: May 12, 2025

California Commission on Aging Hosts Informational Hearing in Los Angeles Focused on Disaster Recovery

SACRAMENTO --- The California Commission on Aging (CCoA) invites the public, advocates, service providers, and the media to an important informational hearing on the challenges faced by older adults and people with disabilities in the aftermath of wildfires.

Join CCoA for a powerful and timely conversation about the impact of disasters like the January 2025 Los Angeles (LA) wildfires on these vulnerable populations. The hearing, *Recovering Together: Rebuilding Life After the Fires*, will take place on May 22, 2025, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at the Braille Institute of Los Angeles, 41 North Vermont Avenue, East Hollywood. The event will also be live-streamed. Registration is free of charge; visit ccoa.ca.gov/Events for details and registration information.

Participants will explore three key topics across separate panels: **Addressing Urgent Needs, Rebuilding After Disaster**, and **Planning for the Future**. Panelists include:

- Laura Trejo, Director, Los Angeles County Aging & Disabilities Department
- TJ Hill, Executive Director, Disability Community Resource Center, LA
- Joe Cobery, Executive Director, Passages Area Agency on Aging, Chico
- Laura Mosqueda, M.D., Professor of Family Medicine, Geriatrics, and Gerontology, Keck School of Medicine and Leonard Davis School of Gerontology, University of Southern California

Additional speakers will represent caregiving, county agencies, and nonprofit service organizations. Individuals impacted by the wildfires will also share their personal stories.

Special thanks to the Braille Institute of Los Angeles for hosting the event. For over a century, the Braille Institute has been transforming the lives of individuals with blindness and low vision through a wide array of free programs, classes, and services offered at seven centers throughout Southern California.



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The January 2025 wildfires in Los Angeles profoundly affected older adults and people with disabilities, underscoring the heightened risks they face during disasters. While the disproportionate impact on these communities is well-documented and many preparedness tools have been developed, this hearing will focus on recovery and strategies to support long-term resilience.

Tragically, older adults comprised a significant portion of the 30 casualties from the LA fires, with the average age of victims at 77, according to the medical examiner's office. Among the fatalities were individuals with disabilities, including 68-year-old amputee Anthony Mitchell and his son Justin, who had cerebral palsy; both were unable to evacuate without assistance.

Beyond the gravely disproportionate fatality rate for older adults, those who survive struggle to rebuild their lives when their world is upended by disaster. Understanding the long road to recovery for older Californians will help guide strategies that foster resilience and promote stability.

Older adults and people with disabilities often encounter cultural and structural barriers that limit their access to disaster assistance, including:

- Exclusion from preparedness planning
- Evacuation protocols that overlook mobility limitations
- Inadequate shelter resources
- Failures in information dissemination

Some interventions have shown promise, such as leveraging aging and disability-support networks, tailoring communications, and involving older adults and people with disabilities directly in emergency planning. Aging-in-place collaboration networks and mutual aid frameworks for residential care facilities have also been effective in strengthening crisis resilience and recovery efforts.

Remarkably, no casualties were reported among residents of the more than 70 long-term care facilities that were evacuated by dedicated caregivers and first responders. The Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program played a pivotal role in supporting nearly 2,540 long-term care residents during evacuations. Additionally, a spontaneous mutual aid network led by Leading Age California helped rehome displaced residents and mobilize donations. By early April, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had received over 65,000 disaster assistance applications from individuals over age 65.



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Building on these efforts, the California Commission on Aging is committed to amplifying the voices heard at the May 22 hearing and advancing emerging recommendations. This event offers a crucial opportunity to elevate lived experiences, surface urgent needs, and better define recovery for older adults and individuals with disabilities in California.

As the state's principal advocacy body for older adults, the CCoA advises state leaders, legislators, and governmental agencies on policies and programs that promote fairness, autonomy, choice, and dignity for all older Californians.

For more information about the CCoA and its initiatives, please visit <http://ccoa.ca.gov>.

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