



Neighborhood Legal Services
of Los Angeles County

2025 WILDFIRE RESPONSE

| The Role of Disaster Legal Services in Recovery

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STANDING WITH SURVIVORS

Legal Aid's Role in the 2025 Southern California Wildfires

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



“When the disaster declaration was issued, NLSLA responded immediately because families could not wait. People’s lives were upended, and they were grieving the loss of their homes and loved ones, as well as their sense of safety, and their normal lives. Our job was to show up with compassion, guide them through the chaos, and assure them that they were not alone as they began to rebuild.”
– Yvonne Maria Jimenez, NLSLA President & CEO

Following the Presidential Major Disaster Declaration issued on January 8, 2025, Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County (NLSLA) immediately mobilized and led the coordinated legal response to the 2025 Southern California wildfires, one of the most destructive disasters in California’s history. The Eaton, Palisades, and twelve smaller fires caused widespread devastation across Los Angeles and San Diego Counties, displacing entire communities and creating urgent legal needs related to housing, disaster assistance, public benefits, and long-term recovery.

Within days of the declaration, NLSLA activated a regionwide disaster legal services operation, coordinating legal aid providers, law firms, law schools, bar associations, and national partners to ensure continuous access to legal assistance for wildfire survivors. NLSLA organized large-scale disaster-response training for legal services staff and volunteer attorneys and activated national pro bono networks through the Association of Pro Bono Counsel. The response from the legal community was extraordinary, with hundreds of trained attorneys deploying to Disaster Recovery Centers, legal clinics, and hotlines across the region.

Through this coordinated effort, NLSLA delivered legal services at scale, ensuring that wildfire survivors could access assistance navigating FEMA benefits, housing instability, insurance disputes, public benefits interruptions, and disaster-related consumer issues. Legal services were provided both at government-operated Disaster Recovery Centers and directly in impacted communities through clinics, legal education sessions, and outreach events, ensuring survivors were reached regardless of location, mobility, or access barriers. The individuals we served reflected those most disproportionately impacted by disasters, including older adults, people with disabilities, and low-income households.

In addition to direct services, NLSLA pursued impact litigation and affirmative advocacy to address systemic failures revealed by the fires—particularly those affecting renters exposed to toxic smoke, ash, and debris. In partnership with Morrison Foerster LLP, tenant organizers, and fire survivors, NLSLA secured a landmark settlement with Los Angeles County and the Department of Public Health addressing wildfire

contamination and habitability failures following the Eaton Fire. The agreement established a new presumption, inspection and remediation requirements, and enforcement protocols, providing immediate relief to tenants while setting a precedent for future wildfire responses statewide.

The 2025 wildfire response underscored a critical reality: disaster legal services must be treated as an essential, ongoing function rather than an ad hoc intervention. The scale and effectiveness of this year’s response demonstrated the value of advance coordination, trained disaster staff, centralized leadership, and sustained pro bono engagement. As climate-driven disasters continue to increase in frequency and severity, the lessons from 2025 make clear that a strong disaster legal services infrastructure is vital to ensuring that low-income survivors can stabilize their lives, protect their rights, and recover with dignity.

As disasters grow more frequent and complex, the need for strong, permanent disaster legal services has never been greater. We invite funders, partners, policymakers, and community leaders to join NLSLA in sustaining and expanding this critical work by investing in preparedness, supporting rapid-response legal services, and standing with disaster survivors long after the headlines fade. Together, we can ensure that when disaster strikes, justice, stability, and recovery remain within reach for every community.

IMPACT AT A GLANCE

2025 WILDFIRE LEGAL RESPONSES

1,500+

SURVIVORS SERVED

600+

LEGAL CASES OPENED

1,400+

ATTORNEYS TRAINED

800+

PRO BONO ATTORNEYS
DEPLOYED

30+

COMMUNITY OUTREACH
EVENTS

40+

LEGAL CLINICS HELD

50% CLIENTS AGE 50+

40% CLIENTS WITH DISABILITIES

NLSLA'S RECORD OF DISASTER RECOVERY LEGAL AID

Founded in 1965 as part of the nation's War on Poverty, Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County (NLSLA) is now one of the largest and most prominent public interest law offices in California. Over decades of practice across multiple service areas, NLSLA has developed deep expertise in disaster recovery legal aid and is recognized as one of the leading disaster legal services providers nationwide.

When a major earthquake struck the San Fernando Valley in 1994, NLSLA mobilized a rapid disaster response that later became a national model for legal aid organizations. NLSLA deployed advocates to Disaster Recovery Centers to address urgent individual and family needs and simultaneously worked with federal and local officials to confront systemic barriers. That experience propelled NLSLA into policy advocacy at the local, state, and national levels and laid the foundation for our long-term disaster legal services infrastructure. Because of the expertise NLSLA developed over the years and the reputation we earned, when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast more than a decade later, NLSLA was called upon to assist.

In 2018, NLSLA was awarded a significant grant from the Legal Services Corporation to build up Los Angeles's infrastructure for regional disaster legal assistance. Only weeks after receiving that grant, the Woolsey fire hit, and NLSLA led the legal services response. In 2018, NLSLA also led the effort to form the Disaster Legal Aid Collaborative (DLAC) SoCal. DLAC SoCal brought together legal services providers, law firms, and law schools to build a standing disaster-response network, modeled on a volunteer fire department, by organizing and training volunteers before disasters occur.

Following our response to the Woolsey Fire in 2018, NLSLA assumed the lead role for Legal Aid in Southern California, coordinating legal services providers and the broader legal community to meet the needs of low-income disaster survivors. NLSLA later applied these same disaster recovery skills during the COVID-19 crisis.

NLSLA has continued to serve on the board of the Emergency Network of Los Angeles (ENLA), remains an active member of DLAC and the statewide Disaster Legal Aid Collaborative, and convenes annual tabletop disaster preparedness exercises for partners. That sustained commitment positioned NLSLA to respond quickly and effectively to the 2025 wildfires.



Lena Silver, NLSLA's Director of Policy and Administrative Advocacy speaking at the press conference announcing NLSLA and Morrison Foerster's lawsuit against Los Angeles County and the City of Pasadena, May 22, 2025.

THE SCALE OF THE 2025 WILDFIRES

“We’re facing a historic natural disaster. And I think that can’t be stated strong enough.”
Kevin McGowan, Director of Emergency Management, Los Angeles County

On January 7, 2025, two of the most destructive wildfires in Southern California history ignited in the Palisades and Pasadena/Altadena areas. The scale of the 2025 wildfires presented unprecedented challenges. A convergence of extreme winds, prolonged drought, and accumulated vegetation delayed containment of the two major fires until January 31, more than three weeks after ignition. The disaster extended far beyond the Eaton and Palisades areas, with 14 separate fires erupting across Los Angeles and San Diego Counties.

Severe wind damage compounded the crisis across the region while widespread power shutoffs and outages disrupted entire communities. Significant human and systemic failures, including reductions in firefighting capacity, water availability issues, and infrastructure and construction management challenges, further intensified the devastation. Together, these factors made the 2025 wildfire and wind event one of the most destructive in California history.

While containment was achieved, the 2025 Wildfires destroyed over 18,000 structures, displaced about 180,000 residents, caused 31 deaths, and became one of the costliest in U.S. history. In Altadena, a neighborhood that was home to many Black families, close to half the lives lost were Black residents.

Because of its experience and regional role, NLSLA stepped in to lead the Southern California legal response, coordinating legal service providers and mobilizing the broader legal community to address the urgent and long-term needs of low-income disaster survivors.



The wildfires devastated entire neighborhoods in the Palisades and Altadena-Pasadena communities.



Firefighter fight the Eaton Fire

COORDINATED LEGAL RESPONSE FOLLOWING THE DISASTER DECLARATIONS

“Legal aid organizations serve as a crucial lifeline in disaster recovery, providing essential legal services to survivors facing complex challenges.” Legal Services Corporation

The Presidential Major Disaster Declaration for the Los Angeles wildfires was issued on January 8, 2025, triggering FEMA Individual Assistance and the opening of Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs). Immediately upon issuance of the declaration, NLSLA organized and led large-scale trainings for volunteer attorneys and legal services staff to prepare them to staff DRCs and assist survivors with FEMA claims. DRCs quickly became lifelines for wildfire survivors, and legal aid services needed to be available during all operating hours.

NLSLA activated its national pro bono network by engaging the Association of Pro Bono Counsel (APBCo). The response was extraordinary: more than 1,400 attorneys registered for trainings and over 800 attorneys ultimately volunteered at DRCs and legal clinics.

Law firms, private foundations, and individual donors recognized the need for disaster legal services and supported NLSLA’s work for low-income survivors through generous donations. NLSLA also received significant financial support from FireAid and the Legal Services Corporation (LSC).



NLSLA staff at the Pasadena Disaster Recovery Center



Volunteers mobilize to help disaster victims

DISASTER RECOVERY CENTER IMPACT

Disaster Recovery Centers quickly became lifelines for wildfire survivors, and legal aid services needed to be available during all operating hours. To meet this demand, NLSLA coordinated staffing with DLAC members, pro bono partners, law schools, the California State Bar, local bar associations, and national legal services partners. National Legal Service Providers (LSP) provided critical support, including updated FEMA training materials.

Together, partners developed shared tools for attorneys staffing DRCs, including step-by-step guidance, referral sheets, and survivor-focused educational materials. Resources were also pooled to deliver services beyond the DRCs, including staffing a statewide emergency hotline and organizing issue-specific legal clinics.

To ensure consistent coverage, NLSLA rapidly expanded and trained the pro bono attorney network through the Pro Bono Portal. The response exceeded expectations. NLSLA served more than 1,500 survivors at the DRCs and has opened more than 600 cases to date. Of these open cases, about 40% of our clients report living with a disability, and more than half of our clients are over the age of 50, with many being low-income.

Many of the 600 cases opened have received full-scope services from the newly rebuilt NLSLA Disaster Assistance Project Team. A year into recovery, the legal cases continue to focus on ensuring all FEMA benefits and insurance proceeds are paid out, homes are fully remediated, and survivors access all public benefits and resources to which they are entitled.

OUTREACH, CLINICS, AND DIRECT SERVICES

As survivors' needs evolved, NLSLA adapted existing housing clinics to address disaster-specific issues and created new clinics to address emerging needs, including housing, FEMA, and insurance-focused clinics tailored to wildfire recovery challenges. Recognizing the need to meet survivors where they were, outside government-organized Disaster Relief Centers, NLSLA went into the community to ensure survivors were aware of their rights and the relief they were entitled to, and how NLSLA could help.

In March, NLSLA participated in a resource fair at New Revelations Baptist Church in Pasadena, where we assisted more than 300 community members. We attended a follow-up event at the Church in late March, which included a Know Your Rights presentation. NLSLA held additional Know Your Rights events in the Altadena/Pasadena area, including at the recently reopened Altadena Public Library.

In total, NLSLA held thirty community outreach events and over forty legal clinics, where survivors met one-on-one with attorneys.

IMPACT LITIGATION AND AFFIRMATIVE ADVOCACY

“These tenants came to us in desperation, and we kept hearing similar stories over and over again,” said Lena Silver, NLSLA’s Director of Policy and Administrative Advocacy. “Many tenants have had nowhere to turn when landlords failed to do the right thing and remediate their homes. They were being forced to pay out of pocket for inspections to prove what we already know—the smoke and ash from the Eaton fire is highly toxic and, in many instances, requires professional remediation.”

TENANT PROTECTIONS

In January 2025, in response to the many issues low-income renters faced due to the wildfires, NLSLA advocated to the LA County Board of Supervisors for the restoration of tenant protections, such as those enacted in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The Board voted unanimously in favor of the measure, which provided immediate protections for low-income tenants, their families, and their pets.

Further, NLSLA undertook affirmative advocacy and litigation, particularly in Los Angeles County and Pasadena tenant matters, to address the municipalities’ failure to respond to dangerous conditions arising from toxic smoke, ash, and debris. These environmental hazards caused widespread damage to homes and rental units, and public health and housing departments were unprepared to address it, underscoring the need for legal intervention and systemic reform.

Given the tremendous and urgent needs, NLSLA, in partnership with Morrison Foerster LLP, tenant organizers, and community groups, secured a landmark settlement with Los Angeles County and the Department of Public Health addressing habitability failures following the Eaton Fire. The agreement established a presumption that all rental housing in unincorporated Altadena was impacted by wildfire contamination and requires professional inspections and remediation when tenants file complaints. It also mandated new training and enforcement protocols for County inspectors, public notice of tenants’ rights, and a coordinated outreach campaign to ensure that affected renters are informed of available protections. This outcome not only provided immediate relief to Eaton Fire survivors but also established a precedent for how local governments should address wildfire-related contamination in rental housing.

OTHER FIRE-RELATED CLIENT STORIES

*"[It was] such a relief to have the support to navigate this! I really appreciate the help!"
NLSLA client and attendee of the fire recovery clinic.*

RESTORING LOST ESTATE DOCUMENT

A woman in her 50s with a disability, whose sole source of income is Social Security, lost her home in the Eaton Fire. Amidst the rubble were critical trust and estate planning documents she shared with her now-deceased husband. NLSLA's Estate Planning team worked with her to update and replace her trust, restoring essential legal protections and providing peace of mind following significant personal and financial losses.

STABILIZING HOME, HEALTH & FINANCES AFTER DISPLACEMENT

A woman in her late 70s with a serious medical condition and limited income from Social Security and a pension was displaced from her rental unit due to wildfire damage. NLSLA worked with her building manager to ensure proper remediation of the unit and assisted her in securing FEMA personal property assistance and resolving rental assistance issues. NLSLA also helped her submit a Medi-Cal claim to replace eyeglasses damaged in the fire, successfully advocated with Southern California Edison to remove improper electricity charges after she vacated the unit, and prepared a will, power of attorney, and advance health care directive to protect her long-term interests

SECURING SAFE HOUSING & BENEFITS FOR DISABLED SURVIVOR

NLSLA met a client with a disability and minimal income at the Altadena Disaster Recovery Center after her rental unit burned down in the fire. Attorneys helped her navigate FEMA benefits, resulting in Transitional Sheltering Assistance, displacement assistance, and personal property assistance, and provided support with disaster-related grant applications. NLSLA also assisted her in applying for a disaster Section 8 voucher, requesting reasonable accommodations during the application process, and submitting supporting documentation, leading to a successful housing outcome. In addition, NLSLA helped her establish a special needs trust and continues to advocate for reasonable accommodations and Continued Temporary Housing Assistance through FEMA.

RESTORING FOOD SECURITY

While assisting a client at a FEMA Appeals Clinic, NLSLA identified that her CalFresh (SNAP) food benefits had been terminated following the fire. The client did not know why the termination occurred or how to resolve it. NLSLA filed a case inquiry with the Department of Public Social Services and determined the termination resulted from a missed recertification deadline immediately after the disaster. By demonstrating that the client qualified for a disaster-related stay of the recertification requirement, NLSLA secured reinstatement of her benefits and retroactive CalFresh assistance. The client expressed deep gratitude for the advocacy, and NLSLA continues to assist her with FEMA-related issues.

STABILIZING ILLEGAL EVICTION & SECURING STABILITY

An older adult with a disability and minimal income faced housing instability after her landlord began harassing her, refused her rent, and issued an illegal notice terminating her tenancy following the fire. NLSLA intervened by sending a cease-and-desist letter addressing the unlawful notice, harassment, and rent refusal. As a result, the landlord rescinded the termination notice, and the client was able to remain stably housed in her long-term rental home.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO ACCESS FEMA ASSISTANCE

A low-income man whose home burned down in the Eaton Fire became homeless and was initially denied FEMA assistance due to alleged insufficient proof of identity and occupancy. Two NLSLA attorneys assisted him in submitting additional documentation. They advocated directly with FEMA at the Disaster Recovery Center and by phone, resulting in approval for serious needs, housing, and personal property assistance totaling more than \$12,000. NLSLA also connected the client with a pro bono attorney who helped amend his out-of-state birth certificate and obtain certified copies, allowing him to secure a California driver's license. The client thanked NLSLA for providing life-changing assistance.

PREVENTING EVICTION & STABILIZING HOUSING

An NLSLA attorney met a disaster survivor at the Disaster Recovery Center who was at risk of eviction from her home of more than ten years due to unresolved rental arrears. NLSLA investigated the problem, negotiated a payment plan with the landlord, and secured an additional grant to help cover the remaining balance and a portion of her October rent. As a result, the client avoided eviction and gained much-needed financial stability as they recovered from the fire.



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Visit nlsla.org/disaster for more resources

LESSONS LEARNED

PREPARATION FOR DISASTER

The most crucial lesson NLSLA took from the wildfires is that disaster legal services must be funded as an essential, ongoing legal service rather than treated as an ad hoc response. Across the region, legal services providers experienced capacity constraints, even among those with prior disaster experience, primarily due to a lack of dedicated disaster staffing. Moving forward, legal services providers must invest in trained disaster staff, maintain updated Continuity of Operations Plans (COOPs), and clearly communicate internal priority shifts immediately following a disaster.

Each legal services provider should designate disaster assistance leads in advance, participate consistently in DLAC meetings during blue-sky periods, and maintain current COOPs that include disaster-specific staff and community response training. Annual, collaborative disaster trainings, particularly with law firm partners, should become standard practice, supported by up-to-date contact lists and shared planning.

A designated Southern California LSP should serve as the lead disaster coordinator and maintain up-to-date contact information for all DLAC and statewide partners, updated at least twice annually. An up-to-date DLAC website and centralized resource portal are critical, with all members committing to shared maintenance of training materials at <https://disasterlegalservicesca.org/>.

Trauma-informed onboarding for volunteers must continue to evolve, and disaster trainings, such as Pro Bono Training Institute modules, should be reviewed and refreshed annually.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSE AND COORDINATION

Effective response requires clearly defined, but flexible, roles for local, statewide, and national partners, tailored to the scope and location of each disaster. Annual tabletop exercises should reinforce coordination protocols, clarify responsibilities, and strengthen collaboration across the legal aid community.

When a disaster occurs, a designated lead legal services provider must convene partners, coordinate legal services using DLAC matrices, and communicate available resources quickly and clearly. Outreach through trusted community partners, such as nonprofits, faith institutions, libraries, and senior centers, remains essential for reaching impacted populations.

Staffing of Disaster Recovery Centers and Local Recovery Centers must rely on updated protocols, shared training materials, coordinated volunteer recruitment, and efficient use of pro bono networks. Hotline staffing, clinic development, data tracking, and materials creation should be centrally coordinated and shared across partners.

VOLUNTEER COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

Sustained collaboration is essential to avoid duplication, reduce volunteer fatigue, and ensure consistent messaging. Outreach to pro bono partners should be coordinated through the Association of Bro Pro Bono Counsel, local bar associations, and firm leadership, with clear expectations that volunteer needs may evolve. Identifying attorneys with prior disaster experience, relevant subject-matter expertise, and long-term commitment is critical, as is developing meaningful roles for non-attorney volunteers.

SUSTAINING DISASTER LEGAL SERVICES

As the climate crisis intensifies, the demand for disaster legal services will continue to grow. The unprecedented response from the philanthropic and legal communities following the 2025 wildfires allowed NLSLA to establish a dedicated disaster assistance team and deliver critical services at scale. The ongoing challenge is sustaining this level of support to ensure that disaster survivors continue to have access to justice when they need it most. NLSLA is committed to sustaining legal support for low-income wildfire survivors for the long run by providing services until the need no longer exists, because no one should face devastation and injustice alone.

NLSLA will continue leading and strengthening Southern California's disaster legal response, and calls on partners, funders, and policymakers to invest in sustained disaster legal services before the next crisis strikes.



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