



Karol Swartzlander, Executive Director
Gavin Newsom, Governor

INFORMATIONAL HEARING MINUTES

Recovering Together: Rebuilding Life After the Fires

An informational hearing on the challenges faced by older adults and people with disabilities in the aftermath of wildfires.

Thursday, May 22, 2025

David Lindeman, Chair

1. **Call to Order, Roll Call, Pledge of Allegiance**

California Commission on Aging (CCoA) Chair Dr. David Lindeman called the meeting to order and led the Pledge of Allegiance at 10:00 am. Swartzlander called role.

Commissioners in attendance in-person: Chair Lindeman, Vice Chair Toppel, and Commissioners Adelman, Castile, Cislowski, Davis, Frank, Goodall, Jauregui, Meador, Qazi, Schmeding, and Tate.

Staff in attendance in-person: Swartzlander, Coleman, Smith, Melman, and Anderson.

A Quorum was established

2. **Approval of Minutes from the March 11 General Meeting**

Approval of the Minutes was combined with the roll call vote. Minutes Approved.

3. **Welcome**

Chair Lindeman introduced Jim Kales, Chief Executive Officer of the Braille Institute. Kales has led the organization for the past two years, following a distinguished nonprofit career in Chicago, where he held leadership roles at United Way, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and Aspire.

In his remarks, Kales emphasized the powerful impact of nonprofit collaboration. He noted that while braille instruction currently comprises only about 2% of the Institute's services, advances in technology have dramatically expanded opportunities for individuals with low or limited vision to live active, independent lives. Looking ahead, the Braille Institute plans to grow significantly, aiming to serve 200,000 individuals over the next five years through strategic partnerships. Kales also shared that the Institute recently assisted 20 clients who lost their homes in the Altadena and Pacific fires.

4. **Opening Statement**

Chair Lindeman expressed gratitude to the Braille Institute staff for hosting the hearing.

Chair Lindeman recognized the profound impact the Braille Institute has on communities

throughout Los Angeles and across California and noted that by empowering individuals with vision loss to live independently and participate fully in their communities, the Braille Institute has enriched lives and strengthened our collective well-being.

Chair Lindeman discussed the January fires in Southern California and highlighted the devastating and disproportionate effects that disasters have on older adults and individuals with disabilities. He explained that the hearing includes three panels to provide insight into the recovery challenges facing older adults: the current status of recovery and resources available, challenges to recovery, and finally, the future of disaster response and recovery.

Chair Lindeman noted that the hearing will examine the complications for older adults and people with disabilities engaged in the rebuilding process, including those who have lost their homes as well as those receiving care in long-term facilities. In addition, the hearing will explore how California can approach the future of disaster response and recovery, so that older adults and people with disabilities are not disparately impacted. With the projected demographic growth of the older Californian population in the coming years, disaster planning, response, and recovery cannot be decoupled from the issue of aging.

Chair Lindeman asked that speakers follow the best practice of briefly describing themselves before speaking, in consideration of individuals with limited vision.

5. **PANEL 1: Addressing Urgent Needs**

The Commission heard witness testimony on the ongoing needs of older adults and people with disabilities impacted by recent Los Angeles fires.

Dr. Laura Trejo, Director, Los Angeles County Aging & Disabilities Department

Dr. Trejo noted that an estimated 2,500 long-term care residents were evacuated, and as of 5/22/25, 2,330 clients were confirmed safe. She reported that complications in providing services to older adults following a disaster include access, coordination, and communication among providers. She added that the unmet needs of older adults are still housing, financial security, and social connections. She noted that State and local governments can do the following to meet unmet needs: ensure informed and coordinated services; support the visibility and critical role of our services/providers; and engage in planning efforts to educate the public. The Aging and Disability Resource Collaborative has a seat at the table of the Los Angeles Office of Emergency Services. They have access to county resources and communicate in real time with county partners during emergencies.

The Department of Aging and Disability has raised the visibility of the unique needs of its clients.

Rachel Tate, Vice President, Ombudsman Services, Wise & Healthy Aging

Tate noted that the evacuees from skilled nursing facilities and residential care facilities for the elderly included individuals for whom their facilities were home. Others who anticipated a short-term stay learned that their home of decades was lost to fire in their absence. She emphasized that residents' needs have evolved during this disaster and subsequent recovery. She noted that many facility evacuations happened rapidly, some while the fire was in extreme proximity. This resulted in some residents being evacuated without medications, incontinence supplies, and supportive devices. She emphasized that other residents were transferred directly to equivalent levels of care but were moved to facilities not associated with the facility of origin, resulting in an inability to share electronic medical records.

TJ Hill, Executive Director, Disability Community Resource Center (DCRC)

Hill emphasized that in the wake of recent wildfires, the DCRC was inundated with urgent needs from community members with disabilities and older adults. These included access to safe, accessible temporary housing; immediate replacement of durable medical equipment; emergency power sources for assistive technologies; and connection to medications and caregiving services. He noted that many of these needs arose from systemic failures in disaster planning and response. Alert systems, evacuation procedures, shelters, and even public messaging were not designed with accessibility in mind. Reliable, accessible transportation options were limited, with paratransit services often at or beyond capacity during evacuations. He added that crucial services were delayed or denied simply because people with disabilities were not integrated into the disaster response framework.

Commissioner Q & A:

Commissioners asked how wildfire response could be improved. The panel noted that the community could have been better prepared and suggested multiple approaches, including public education, involving individuals with disability in emergency planning, and early alert systems. The discussion included reverse mortgages, and the potential benefits of Artificial Intelligence. It was shared that Los Angeles just launched a social health hub called the Regional Coordinating Council; they are about to have the first meeting of their Emergency Response and Resilience Committee. There was consensus that real solutions will require all parties to work together.

6. **PANEL 2: Rebuilding After Disaster**

The Commission heard testimony on the challenges older adults and people with disabilities face in trying to restore their lives after a disaster. The panel focused on the complications with finding housing and continuing long-term care. Panelists examined difficulties in navigating insurance, mitigating fraud targeting vulnerable populations, and rebuilding.

Tracie Mann, Chief of Programs, Los Angeles County Development Authority (LACDA) Mann discussed the joint state and Los Angeles County Housing Task Force efforts to assist wildfire survivors in transitioning from interim housing into long-term. Reverse mortgages, estate planning, and insurance rights are also being examined. Housing costs were an issue in the county before the fires, and now there is even more competition for limited affordable housing. The Housing Task Force is working on developing multifamily housing to replace housing lost in the fires, but funding is needed. Mann noted that LA County is awaiting a response from the federal government regarding the provision of additional disaster relief funding for housing. The state released a homeownership grant, making approximately five million dollars available to assist renters in becoming homeowners and to help homeowners with necessary repairs to make their homes livable. The state will release more funds over the summer for wildfire relief. The Housing Task Force brings together groups, including nonprofit community groups, to best serve those impacted by the fires. About 15% of the 50 Section 8 vouchers provided to wildfire survivors were given to older adults.

Bertha Sanchez Hayden, Associate Vice President of Justice for Seniors and Dependent Adults, Bet Tzedek

Hayden shared that Bet Tzedek has been hosting outreach meetings with those impacted by the fires to help them navigate numerous recovery services. She noted that many older adults feel overwhelmed by navigating the system, and critical deadlines are often difficult for them to meet. The economic insecurity burdening older adults further complicates their recovery. Many are intimidated by the disaster recovery centers themselves and all the information, choices, documentation, legal documents, and agencies involved. One-on-one personal intervention is needed to assist as well as disaster protocols that are inclusive of the challenges faced by this community. She emphasized that financial abuse and identity theft is another issue for those trying to access benefits. Many individuals and families are additionally challenged by the need to reconfigure care plans.

Tierre Thornton, Executive Director, Ivy Park at Culver City, Los Angeles

Thornton addressed the impact of the fires on individuals living in assisted living facilities as well as team members. Individuals are dealing with the loss of all property, obtaining necessary medications, on top of PTSD and a great deal of anxiety. Long-term care facilities with availability offered open beds at a discount to impacted adults and shared transportation. Her facility prioritized individuals with dementia.

Sue Kujawa, Altadena resident

Kujawa, a homeowner and resident of Altadena, spoke about how her house had long represented safety, security, and stability—a place where she had planned to age in place and eventually pass on to her children. She shared the story of her ordeal, the immense emotional trauma she experienced, and the incredible support she received from Villages Pasadena, where she is a member. On the night of the fire, Kujawa never received an evacuation order but was fortunate that a friend invited her over, meaning she wasn't home when the fire destroyed her house. She had the foresight to bring her laptop and important documents with her. Fellow Villagers rallied to provide clothing, food, pet supplies, gift cards, computers, air purifiers, and help with everything from finding a temporary Accessory Dwelling Unit in Pasadena to navigating paperwork, insurance claims, connecting with architects, and accessing technical support.

Kujawa described her experience with insurance, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and disaster recovery centers as positive and remains determined to rebuild. She has worked closely with other Village members affected by the fire, and they continue to support one another through the recovery process. Kujawa values most the kindness of those who spend time with her and chat about everyday life—because that sense of normalcy makes a big difference in her healing.

Commissioner Q & A:

Commissioners were concerned with how to access assistance navigating through the available services at disaster recovery centers, especially those with mobility challenges, trauma, and exhaustion. Technology could mirror what is offered at the disaster relief centers and expand access to assistance. Comments noted that experience in previous disasters and training resulted in quicker and more effective support. Community-based organizations (CBOs) are serving subsets of survivors and are stepping up to assist their local areas. The joint state and Los Angeles County housing task force is providing a forum for collaboration and connecting CBOs to housing options. Many services do not require income eligibility. Part of the recovery is building resilience by educating older adults on

topics related to estate planning and insurance to prepare them for future events. There has been difficulty accessing data from the federal government. LACDA is using data collected by FEMA, 211 and others to help determine needs. There is no centralized system and a new data model would help reinforce recovery needs. The insurance crisis may exacerbate the affordable housing crisis.

BREAK

PANEL 3: Planning for the Future

The Commission heard testimony on the steps state and local government can take to plan for the near future and the next natural disaster. This panel looked to previous disasters in the state to understand strategies that can be implemented to help in the recovery process. Additionally, panelists discussed how local governments can ensure older adults and persons with disabilities are included in disaster planning and are better prepared for the next disaster.

Joe Cobery, Director, Passages Area Agency on Aging, Chico

Cobery was serving as Director at Passages Area Agency on Aging when the Camp Fire devastated the town of Paradise, California, in 2018, leaving it a shell of what it once was. Older adults suffered the greatest losses—loss of home, community, and life. At the time of the fire, there was no plan for responding to such destruction. However, efforts like the Rebuild Paradise Foundation now provide Paradise and other communities with a roadmap for navigating such disasters. The foundation, a non-profit established to support the long-term recovery of Camp Fire-affected communities, created a guide for residents, offering assistance with insurance renewals, grants for creating defensible space, and a library of residential floor plans that meet new building standards. The Camp Fire destroyed 90% of homes and damaged 18,000 structures. Of the 85 people who lost their lives, 87% were over the age of 60. Former residents of Paradise continue to face challenges. The older adult population, once synonymous with the town, no longer exists. With so few older adults, it is difficult to establish and maintain services. Without hospitals and clinics, attracting and retaining medical professionals is a struggle. The cost of rebuilding a home has risen due to strict building codes designed for enhanced fire resistance. Additionally, retaining and affording homeowners' insurance remains a significant challenge.

Dr. 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.

Dr. Mosqueda reflected on her firsthand experience during the recent Southern California wildfires, emphasizing critical lessons to improve emergency preparedness for future disasters. She witnessed the early chaos of evacuations near Eaton Canyon and rushed to the Pasadena Convention Center upon learning that residents from nursing homes and care facilities were being relocated there. The convention center, not designed as an emergency shelter, quickly became overwhelmed.

The scene was chaotic. Frail, medically complex older adults arrived in waves—many in wheelchairs or on gurneys, often disoriented or cognitively impaired. They were accompanied by staff who were themselves underprepared and lacked access to crucial information. Basic infrastructure was absent: no beds, medical stations, supplies, or sufficient power. Intake procedures were unclear. Over the following days, minimal services began to emerge, including basic medical care, food, and portable sanitation facilities. The evacuees' needs were extensive: feeding tubes, colostomy and urinary bags, oxygen support, wound care, and more. Many had no identification, medical history, or emergency contact information. Staff often lacked access to medication lists or diagnoses. In those critical early days, the most urgent needs included: accurate records, durable medical equipment, personal protective equipment, basic care supplies, accessible facilities, and above all—coordination and communication.

This experience revealed just how ill-equipped our systems are to support older adults and people with disabilities during emergencies. It also exposed the consequences of ageism: confusion or hearing loss was too often mistaken for cognitive decline, leading to inappropriate assumptions and care.

Dr. Mosqueda concluded that these fires exposed deep gaps in our emergency infrastructure, especially in safeguarding vulnerable populations. She noted it would be a tragedy not to learn from this experience. With thoughtful policy, inclusive planning, and strong partnerships with local health systems, California has the opportunity to lead the nation in building a just, effective disaster response system that truly meets the needs of older adults and people with disabilities.

John Burke, Corporate Safety Officer, Human Good

John discussed mutual aid systems in long-term care and how they operate in disaster response and recovery. He discussed the existing mutual aid systems among long-term care facilities, how they are performing, and how the state can facilitate a comprehensive mutual aid system for long-term care. A centralized mutual aid system is essential for the

effective support and management of emergencies. FEMA's Incident Command System, modeled after the Cal Fire Incident Command structure, demonstrates the efficacy of a unified approach. John noted that during the Eaton Fire, Human Good successfully managed an emergency response across four affected communities in Southern California. However, they faced challenges getting the information they needed about the severity and location of the fire from the county Offices of Emergency services. Detailed and up-to-date information is essential to deciding when to mobilize for evacuation and implementing agreements with facilities with which they share mutual aid agreements.

In addition to mutual aid, Burke emphasized that senior living communities must be engaged with county Offices of Emergency Services well before an emergency arises. Relationships with key organizations, such as the Medical Health Operational Area Coordinator for the State, are essential for coordinated response efforts. Communities receiving reimbursement from Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services are federally mandated to collaborate with local Emergency Medical Service agencies, participate in annual emergency drills and trainings, and are routinely surveyed by the California Department of Public Health for compliance with emergency preparedness standards. Local counties must reciprocate this engagement to ensure a seamless, informed, and timely response when crises occur. Burke emphasized the need for preparedness and shared MassMAP (Massachusetts Mutual Aid Plan) as the most comprehensive and effective emergency preparedness system in his view. It serves as a strong model that other states could emulate to strengthen resilience and coordination across senior care communities.

Katie Brandon, Director, Pasadena Village

Brandon emphasized the critical role Pasadena Village plays in disaster preparedness and response for older adults living independently in Pasadena and Altadena. Founded to foster community among fiercely independent seniors, Pasadena Village leverages social connections to provide essential support, particularly during crises. The Eaton Fire, which prompted the evacuation of 90 members, showcased how deeply members rely on and help one another. The Village's framework empowers older adults to build personal support networks, with additional assistance from a dedicated Care Team—comprised of trained social workers, therapists, chaplains, and nurses—ready to offer professional, compassionate help.

Brandon detailed the wide-ranging impact of the fire, including emotional trauma, medical and technology challenges, and shortages of housing, food, and transportation. Critical

actions during and after the fire included maintaining up-to-date emergency contact information, providing ongoing technology training and support, mobilizing volunteers, and strengthening partnerships with other community organizations.

Pasadena Village's experience with the challenges of aging greatly enhanced its ability to respond quickly and effectively. With pre-established partnerships, a vetted volunteer pool, and a wide network of professionals familiar with seniors' needs, the Village proved that supporting independence is key to effective recovery.

Brandon shared this list of older adults' needs in emergencies:

- Early warning systems for disasters
- Personal preparedness through workshops and resource kits
- Technology support
- Trauma informed and culturally appropriate mental health support
- Responsive transportation solutions
- Fraud and scam prevention
- Opportunities to be empowered and to create support systems

Commissioner Q & A:

Health & Behavioral Health

- Inquired about anticipated health effects for older adults displaced by the fires.
- Asked about behavioral health impacts at the sub-acute and chronic stages.
- Expressed concern for better support of individuals with dementia, Alzheimer's disease, developmental disabilities, and mental health in the emergency shelters.
- Importance to acknowledge the trauma and provide ongoing support.

Housing & Affordability

- Raised questions about affordable aging in place, especially for middle-class individuals on fixed incomes who have lived in their homes for generations.

Disaster Response & Mutual Aid

- Asked about the role and availability of disaster recovery centers and how to ensure impacted individuals receive needed assistance.
- Discussed the roles of community organizations in disaster response efforts.
- Inquired about potential abuse of mutual aid systems and strategies for preventing misuse.

- Opportunities for leadership and community are essential to sharing strengths and support.
- The importance of including the older population in disaster planning and recovery.
- Transportation is critical to preplanning. Suggestion to use Dial A Ride for evacuation, as they already know where their users live.
- Emergency shelter preparation and discharge must be more mindful. People who have lost their housing need a place to go.
- Emergency evacuation centers need to be equipped to support older people and adults with disabilities, particularly residents of long-term care.
- Emergency response staff need to be trained in assisting older people and adults with disabilities (i.e. Red Cross).

Data & Information Access

- Highlighted concerns regarding the lack of accessible data on individuals impacted by the fires.
- Noted the California Department of Aging Data Dashboard as a valuable tool for tracking and decision-making.
- Interest in long term impact studies.

Insurance & Risk

- Voiced concerns about the ongoing insurance crisis in California, specifically regarding the availability of homeowners' insurance.
- Health care fraud, financial abuse, abuse in the construction industry, and insurance scams prey on the vulnerable.

7. Public Comment

Speakers expressed appreciation for the Commission and the panelists.

In addition, these topics were raised for consideration:

- The importance of multilingual and culturally appropriate services and designs
- The vast potential of training In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) workers in emergency response.
- Emergency and Disaster Readiness Training for IHSS workers is available through the Center for Caregiver Advancement. Funding is needed to make it more broadly available.
- There was a lack of necessary medical supplies at the Convention Center emergency evacuation center.



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- The lack of clarity between the city and county as to who was in charge during the evacuation and at the evacuation centers. A clear leadership structure must be defined before the next emergency.
- U.S. Small Business Administration loans are available to homeowners, renters, non-profits, and businesses of all sizes.

8. **Adjourn**

The hearing adjourned at 2:15 pm