



DISASTER RECOVERY AND RESPONSE: Legal Aid's Role in Supporting California Communities

California faces a wide range of disasters from wildfires and earthquakes to floods and severe storms and these events often hit vulnerable communities the hardest. Vulnerable communities face greater risks before, during, and after disasters, with fewer resources to prepare, evacuate, or recover. This fact sheet highlights key legal challenges disaster survivors face and the legal assistance available to help them recover.

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OVERVIEW

Legal Services Trust Fund Commission (LSTFC)-funded legal aid organizations play a critical role in helping survivors rebuild their lives by providing essential legal services. After a natural disaster, under-resourced communities face heightened risks and urgent legal needs. Indigent persons, undocumented individuals, veterans, and seniors may struggle to rebuild, but civil legal aid providers can help them navigate these challenges.

WILDFIRE INCIDENTS IN CALIFORNIA

Wildfires are the most common disasters in California. Below are the total annual wildfire incidents from 2020 to 2026 to date.¹

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026*	TOTAL
Wildfires	8,648	7,396	7,477	7,386	8,110	8,036	12	47,065
Acres Burned	4.3M	2.6M	331,358	332,822	1.1M	525,223	1	9.1M
Confirmed Loss of Life	33	3	9	4	1	31	0	81
Structures Damaged/Destroyed	11,116	3,846	1,279	179	2,148	16,512	0	35,080

*These numbers reflect disasters only through January 28, 2026.

Since 2015, California has experienced 148 federally declared natural disasters including²

126 Wildfires

14 Severe Storms

7 Floods

1. California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. *Incidents* (as of January 28, 2026) <https://www.fire.ca.gov/incidents>.

2. Federal Emergency Management Agency, OpenFEMA Dataset: OpenFEMA Data Sets - v1 (as of January 28, 2026) <https://www.fema.gov/openfema-data-page/openfema-data-sets-v1>.



DISASTER RECOVERY: LEGAL ISSUE TIMELINE³

A natural disaster can have long-lasting impacts on individuals, families, and communities. From wildfires, floods, and mudslides, LSTFC-funded legal aid organizations have mobilized to support survivors providing essential resources to recover in the months and years following a disaster.

1–6 weeks after

Employment

Wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and job loss

Consumer

Price gouging, consumer scams, and utility shutoffs

Income Maintenance

Bankruptcy, FEMA recoupments and appeals, and public benefits

Housing

Landlord-tenant issues, home foreclosure, and security deposits



1–6 months after

Income Maintenance

FEMA and Small Business Administration applications and appeals, insurance claims disputes, and bankruptcy

Housing

Insurance nonrenewal, title clearing, insurance scams, and mobile-home issues

Document Replacement

Identifying documents, birth certificate, and immigration documentation

Family

Domestic violence issues, guardianship, and custody orders



1 year after +

Consumer

Repair and contractor scams, insurance scams, and claim disputes

Housing

Foreclosures, landlord-tenant issues, and housing disputes

SUPPORTING DISASTER SURVIVORS: LEGAL AID IN ACTION

The Disaster Legal Assistance Collaborative (DLAC) unites legal aid nonprofits, government agencies, bar associations, law firms, law schools, and others to provide civil legal aid to disaster survivors across California. Several LSTFC-funded legal aid organizations lead these efforts, supporting both clients and their colleagues in disaster preparedness and response. In 2025, in response to the Southern California (SoCal) wildfires, DLAC rapidly connected SoCal providers with expertise from across the state, including deploying staff from Northern and rural California to provide on-the-ground support. Similarly, just as it facilitated this flow of expertise into the region when it needed it, DLAC has since shared SoCal's valuable lessons and strategies with the disaster legal services community statewide.

Legal Services Provided to Disaster Survivors

In 2025, LSTFC-funded legal aid organizations mobilized to provide essential legal services to survivors in a variety of ways. This includes at least:

2,000+

Cases closed through direct representation, ranging from counsel and advice to administrative agency decision.

1,200+

Attendees helped at self-help legal clinics.

149

Days (cumulative) staffing disaster recovery centers.

6,700+

Individuals reached at educational workshops and outreach events including at local assistance and disaster recovery centers.

3. Disaster Legal Services California, *Disaster Info* (as of February 6, 2025) <https://disasterlegalservicesca.org/disaster-info/>.

4. Data was collected February 9, 2025.

