

Survivors Re-enter the Burn Zone, a School is Planned and a Tree Grows in Lāhainā

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LĀHAINĀ, Hawaiʻi – As this town reopened to its sons and daughters, most arrived in pairs for the chance to say goodbye and sift through the ashes.

The re-entry of residents and business owners into the burned area has been carefully orchestrated. It follows intensive efforts by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, working in partnership with cultural monitors from Lāhainā, to clean the worst of the toxic materials left by the flames. And the re-entry process comes ahead of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' contribution to those efforts by removing fire-damaged debris from private property.

“It’s a difficult and slow-moving process but moving with care is necessary to move forward with the recovery,” said FEMA Region 9 Regional Administrator Robert J. Fenton, who is leading the federal response and recovery operation. “We want to be sensitive to and respectful of those who lost so much.”

Local, state and federal officials, working in partnership with community-based organizations, are going to extraordinary lengths to protect returning Lāhainā residents, many of whom are still grieving and healing from the fires.

Permits are required for the designated re-entry zones. Health and safety were top of mind when the first zone, an area along Kaniau Road, opened on Sept. 25. Driven to their property in golf carts, survivors of the Aug. 8 wildfires were offered hooded, white disposable jumpsuits, protective gloves and respirators to insulate them from any ash and debris containing hazardous materials.

Those who opted not to wear the protective suits were able to stand in the street and direct volunteers from Southern Baptist Disaster Relief or Samaritan’s Purse to sift through the ashes for them. Medical and behavioral healthcare staff were also on hand to offer support. As residents departed, some had tears in their eyes.



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Even through the pain and broken pieces, signs of recovery appear across Maui and beyond. Hundreds of millions of dollars in philanthropic pledges and donations have poured in. Hawai'i Gov. Josh Green set Oct. 8 as the date Maui began reopening to tourism with the hope jobs will follow. And FEMA specialists have surged across Maui and O'ahu, visiting more than **6,200** homes to make sure all eligible survivors, including those who have relocated temporarily, have a chance to apply for FEMA disaster assistance.

As of Oct. 11, FEMA and the U.S. Small Business Administration have approved **more than \$195.9 million** in federal assistance for eligible Maui residents and businesses affected by the wildfires. That number includes **\$165.1 million** in long-term, low-interest SBA disaster loans for homeowners, renters and businesses, and more than **\$30.8 million** in FEMA assistance for more than **6,300** households in Maui County to rebuild or repair their homes. Included in the FEMA total is more than **\$14.6 million** for housing assistance and **\$16.1 million** to cover other disaster-related expenses such as medical bills, critical needs, personal property and repair or replacement of vehicles.

A step in the recovery that may please grade-school students, their parents and guardians is the solid progress being made toward a temporary replacement for the King Kamehameha III Elementary School, which was destroyed in the fires. FEMA has tasked the Corps of Engineers to design and oversee the installation of a temporary school campus in coordination with the Hawai'i Department of Education. FEMA and its federal partners will continue to support the state and county as they work toward a permanent solution for schoolchildren of West Maui.

The American Red Cross, meanwhile, has provided **\$11.3 million** in financial assistance to help survivors with immediate needs including such essentials as meals; medications; transportation; replacement of durable medical equipment like CPAP machines; housing needs and clothing. The organization has also provided **\$44,000** in travel expenses to 23 families.

In a robust effort, the Red Cross has taken a lead role in coordinating emergency housing with Maui County. The county, the Red Cross and several private organizations are partnering with the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement on the Host Housing Support Program, an effort to have local residents open their existing homes, spare rooms or rental units to house survivors. The pilot program pays property owners \$375 for each person hosted – or a maximum \$1,500 a



month for up to six months. The goal is to keep families and friends together and near their schools, churches and stores.

FEMA has two additional types of temporary housing for Maui County FEMA applicants. Under the Direct Lease program, FEMA pays to lease residential properties for use by survivors. In the Multi-Family Lease and Repair program, FEMA arranges to repair owners' multi-family dwellings in exchange for the owners agreeing to house eligible applicants. Maui County, the State of Hawaii, FEMA and the private sector are actively seeking owners of rental units suitable for families and individuals for both programs.

As part of a difficult stage in the recovery, the Corps of Engineers is supporting Maui County in its efforts to collect right-of-entry forms from private property owners prior to starting the removal of fire debris. Meanwhile, the Environmental Protection Agency has been monitoring air quality, providing technical assistance for evaluating the public water systems, and removing hazardous materials from burned residential properties with the aid and guidance of Lāhainā-based cultural monitors. EPA has already assessed and removed hazardous materials from nearly 1,100 properties.

Altogether, FEMA has issued 72 mission assignments to federal agencies called in to help after the wildfires. By Oct. 9, FEMA had obligated more than **\$510 million** for that work. Of that amount, more than **\$492.7 million** was obligated for direct federal assistance requested by the state. Much of that funding – about **\$400 million** – went for work done by the Corps of Engineers. Another **\$17.3 million** was obligated for FEMA's federal operations support.

Survivors who are planning to repair their damaged homes are invited to meet with FEMA's hazard mitigation specialists, who are visiting home-improvement stores on Maui to share construction tips and techniques.

And for those who still haven't applied for FEMA disaster assistance, there is still time. You have until **Thursday, Nov. 9**, to apply to FEMA for individual assistance and to the U.S. Small Business Administration for a disaster loan for physical property damage. For more information about the ways to apply, visit fema.gov/disaster/4724.



As the recovery moves into its third month, the measured progress of numerous response missions illustrates the magnitude of the challenges.

Yet one sign of hope has come from Lāhainā's famed 150-year-old banyan tree, thought to be the largest of its kind in the United States. The beloved 60-foot-tall landmark, standing downtown near the old courthouse, was severely damaged by the flames. Scorched leaves sit shriveled in the sun and its multiple trunks are charred. Residents and volunteer arborists have been nursing it back to life, watering it every day and treating it with nutrient-rich compost.

A few weeks ago, new growth shot up around the trunks and clusters of bright green leaves burst through the fire-damaged canopy that covers about a half-acre.

For the latest information on the Maui wildfire recovery efforts, visit mauicounty.gov, mauirecovers.org and fema.gov/disaster/4724. Follow FEMA on social media: [@FEMARegion9](https://twitter.com/FEMARegion9) and facebook.com/fema.

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