

FEMA Contractors Work With and For the Local Community

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KIHEI, Hawaiʻi – For survivors of the Maui wildfires, navigating disaster resources is critical to their recovery. With the wide variety of languages spoken in Hawaiʻi, many survivors require interpreters to access the information they need.

Language interpretation is one of a long list of services that the Federal Emergency Management Agency provides after a state receives a major presidential disaster declaration. FEMA staff identifies contractors to provide language, security, and janitorial services as well as supplies, everything from pencils to rental trucks and portable restrooms.

Top of mind is always the opportunity to hire locally. Local hiring supports the economies on Maui and Oʻahu, where survivors live and FEMA maintains several offices.

“I like to make sure that we always use the resources of the local people because it does put the money back into the community,” said FEMA Contracting Officer Demetria Carter.

After the State of Hawaiʻi received a major disaster declaration for the August 2023 wildfires, disaster workers began flying to Honolulu and Maui, setting up shop and organizing FEMA’s response operations.

One of Carter’s goals was to recruit and educate local businesses and prepare them for contract opportunities not only for FEMA’s immediate needs but for any Hawaiʻi disasters that inevitably will come.

She recalls that not a single local vendor ultimately awarded a FEMA contract had ever been registered before on the federal government’s System for Award Management, or [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov). She did her research and reached out to companies that provide a variety of services on Maui.



Ultimately, a contract was awarded to a Kihei-based business, Aloha Cleaning Experts, which provides professional cleaning services. Their workers empty waste baskets, and vacuum and shampoo the carpets at a building in Wailuku used by disaster workers.

Owner Rich Littlefield said that when the contracting opportunity arose, he relied on an online video to help with signing up on SAM.gov, a requirement to qualify for a federal contract.

“It takes time,” he said. “You have to familiarize yourself. You need understanding.”

Security is one of the first contracts awarded after a presidential disaster declaration. Paragon Systems, a security company that FEMA has worked with on previous disasters, hired eight Maui residents who work to maintain the safety and security of government assets and personnel.

Justin Corpuz was one of many officers who deployed with the Hawaiʻi National Guard after the wildfires. During his deployment, he learned about the open FEMA positions and applied.

Born and raised on Maui, Corpuz said his “main concern is always helping out the community. With this opportunity, I could still help, especially as a local hire.”

Language services was another contract that was awarded early. Given the diverse cultural landscape, it is necessary to break language barriers to reach all wildfire survivors. With the help of local interpreters, FEMA can support the disaster-affected communities in their preferred languages more efficiently and with a deeper cultural sensitivity.

“Hawaiʻi is a very special place with a lot of interesting language needs,” said Sue Zeng, president of Oʻahu-based Language Services Hawaiʻi. FEMA contracted with her company, which has provided interpreters for 12 languages.

Some interpreters were required to take daily flights from their homes on Oʻahu to Maui, where they were needed to interpret Chuukese, Hawaiian, Ilocano, Kosraean, Marshallese, Pohnpeian, Portuguese, Samoan, Spanish, Tagalog, Tongan and Vietnamese.



Interpreter Carolina Davis, who works for Language Services Hawaiʻi, has ensured Spanish-speaking wildfire survivors have access to federal and state resources. “People don’t realize how huge it is to have support in your language, especially in a disaster,” she said. “The language barrier is so significant that it determines whether someone can access the help they need.”

When Disaster Recovery Centers were open, Davis assisted survivors by listening to their stories. Then she would read the literature FEMA and other agencies provided, identify resources, and help the Spanish-speaking community fill out applications for disaster assistance.

For Isabel Quezada Luis, a single mother of six who lost everything when the wildfires destroyed her home in Lahaina, Davis had the greatest impact on her recovery, which is ongoing.

“English is our second language, and it would be impossible for us to navigate all of these resources without the support of an interpreter,” she said as Davis translated.

After the fires, Quezada Luis, her children, and their dachshund were living in her van. She met Davis at the Lahaina Disaster Recovery Center, where she applied for FEMA assistance. Together, they worked to get the family into the emergency sheltering program managed by the State of Hawaiʻi. The American Red Cross ran the day-to-day operations.

In mid-July, the large Quezada Luis family received the keys to a seven-bedroom home in Kihei that was provided under the FEMA Individuals and Households Program. For now, Quezada Luis is settled there with the children, including a pregnant daughter, until she can identify more permanent housing.

With the challenges she encountered as FEMA’s contracting officer in Hawaiʻi, Carter learned to adapt to meet the needs of the community and FEMA’s mission to help people before, during and after disasters. Her experiences on the Maui disaster reinforced lessons she will carry with her.

“What you want to do is educate everybody right now for the main, top services that we would always need,” Carter said. “You want to get those vendors active on SAM so if a disaster were to ever come ... they would be ready.”

