



Ho‘omau Ke Aloha

A Report on Resilient and Inclusive Disaster Response in
Hawai‘i

*Lessons from the 2023 Maui wildfires on language access, trusted community
networks, and equitable recovery — **presentation briefing***

20-MINUTE BRIEFING



The Lahaina Fires, in Numbers

102

Confirmed deaths — the deadliest U.S. wildfire in over a century

2,200+

Structures destroyed; over 85% were residential

700

Affordable housing units lost in a single event

32%

Of Lahaina residents are foreign-born — more than double the national average

Between August 8–11, 2023, fast-moving fires driven by drought, record heat, and extreme winds from Hurricane Dora obliterated Front Street, multigenerational homes, and workforce housing in a matter of hours.





THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Community networks are not supplemental to disaster response.

They are the response.

Community-based organizations, ethnic media, faith leaders, and bilingual navigators translated information, countered misinformation, and bridged trust gaps after the fires — often without adequate resources or formal recognition. This report traces a direct line from four documented barriers, to the four lessons they reveal, to eight best practices, to policy change at every level of government.

4 Barriers



4 Lessons



8 Best Practices



Policy Change

Structural Conditions That Shaped the Disaster

The fires did not create the inequities they exposed — they revealed them. Decades of decisions in land, water, and housing policy concentrated risk on Lahaina's immigrant and working-class communities long before August 2023.



Land Left Fallow

Former sugarcane land, once irrigated, became dense dry grassland — a fuel load beside residential neighborhoods.



Water Rights & Pressure

Water pressure dropped critically before the fires, rooted in decades of contested water-rights politics in West Maui.



Climate Change

Drought, record heat, low humidity, and extreme wind converged — climate risk concentrated on those least able to prepare or recover.



Housing & Tourism Economy

A rental market driven by tourism demand and a chronic affordable-housing shortage left displaced families nowhere to go.

A Community-Engaged, Mixed-Methods Approach



Key Informant Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with government, CBO, and disaster-response leaders.



Facilitated Group Discussions

Cross-validation of emerging themes with community members and service providers.



Document & Policy Review

Reports, legislative materials, and agency documentation corroborated interview findings.

Six Key Informants

- Francis Kau — HI-EMA, State Disaster Recovery Coordinator
- Veronica Mendoza Jachowski — Roots Reborn
- Terrina Wong — Pacific Gateway Center
- Suzanne Zeng — Language Services Hawai'i
- Iris Mendoza — HCIR Language Access Coordinator
- Tellie Matangi — Papa Ola Lōkahi

From Barriers to Action

4 Barriers

- Language access gaps
- Mistrust & fear
- Limited relief access
- Employment & housing instability

4 Lessons

- Language access is life-safety
- Trusted networks are primary
- One-size-fits-all fails
- Recovery is long

8 Best Practices

- Ch. 6 — agency-level actions
- Language planning & partnerships
- Layered communication
- Standing navigator workforce

Policy Change

- Local government
- State government
- Federal government

Four Barriers Immigrant Communities Faced



3.1 Language Access Gaps

Roughly 1 in 3 residents were foreign-born, yet evacuation alerts often went out only in English.



3.2 Mistrust & Immigration Fear

Uniformed responders and confusion over data-sharing deterred immigrants from seeking help.



3.3 Limited Access to Relief Funds

FEMA's household and documentation rules did not match multigenerational, cash-based living.



3.4 & 3.5 Employment & Housing Instability

Tourism jobs vanished overnight; pre-existing economic fragility deepened every loss.

BARRIER 3.1

Language Access Gaps



With roughly one in three Lahaina residents born outside the U.S., language-accessible alerts were not optional — they were lifesaving. Yet survivors reported receiving no evacuation instructions in Ilocano, Tagalog, or Pacific Island languages, among the most widely spoken in Lahaina.

THE TIMELINE FAILURE

Aug 8–11, 2023

Fires strike. Initial planning defaults to Spanish, despite Lahaina's large Filipino & Pacific Islander population.

Following Weeks

Language access relegated to side stations, not embedded in intake or triage.

November 2023

FEMA's interpreter contract finally issued — 3 months after the fires. Most deadlines had already passed.

Fear of Government & Limits on Relief



Mistrust & Immigration-Related Fear

“When immigrants come to us, they’re in a crisis mindset — everything begins with their immigration status. It comes even before the social services.”

— Terrina Wong, Pacific Gateway Center

- National Guard & FEMA presence deterred many from seeking help
- Confusion over data-sharing with immigration authorities
- COFA citizens received inconsistent eligibility information



Limited Access to Relief Funds

- FEMA's household definition excluded multigenerational, shared homes
- Cash-paid, informally employed workers could not document losses
- Underinsured families received limited support

Fragile Economies, Compounded Losses

Precarity was not incidental — it was structural. Disaster struck a community already stretched thin by an informal, cash-based economy and a tourism-dependent labor market tied to specific, now-destroyed places of work.



Jobs Vanished Overnight

Tourism & service-sector jobs disappeared immediately; cash-paid workers were often ineligible for unemployment insurance.



Housing Instability

Loss of informal rental housing pushed families into overcrowded, unstable arrangements for months.



Rippling Health Effects

Respiratory illness, stress, and worsening mental health compounded displacement and financial insecurity.



No Financial Safety Net

Cash savings lost in the fires had no documentation or recourse; FEMA programs assume formal banking.

Hawai‘i Is Representative, Not Exceptional

The patterns in Maui mirror national disparities documented by the National Partnership for New Americans: immigrants are consistently “hit first and worst” by climate disasters, and left behind in recovery.

WHAT MAKES HAWAI‘I DISTINCT

- Island geography limited displacement options off-island
- Cultural & linguistic mismatch with federal responders
- Tourism-dependent economy amplified job loss
- Highest intergenerational co-habitation rate in the nation

NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Federal-State-Local Coordination — Informal relationships don't scale — MOUs and joint planning are the mechanism, not overhead.

Community Infrastructure, Unrecognized — A national asset with no national investment, resilient only for those it wasn't built to reach.

Language Access: A Legal Obligation Unmet — Title VI and EO 13166 already require this. What's missing is enforcement.

Recovery Governance Risk — Devolving responsibility without resources is abdication dressed as flexibility.



What the Barriers Reveal

1

Language access was a life-saving need — not an optional service.

2

Trusted community networks were essential and irreplaceable.

3

One-size-fits-all disaster systems did not fit local realities.

4

Recovery needs extended far beyond the immediate emergency.

LESSON 1

Absence of Requests ≠ Absence of Need



A recurring official justification for skipping language support: “it wasn't requested.” LEP survivors cannot reliably ask for help in a language they don't speak. Absence of a formal request is evidence of a system that made asking too difficult — not evidence of absence of need.

“Tellie arrived at Veterans Memorial to find it operating English-only because ‘no one had asked’ for language support. Within five minutes, she was speaking with Marshallese survivors who had already been turned away.”

POLICY / PRACTICE RESPONSE

Adopt formal language access plans built for emergency timelines: region-specific priority language rosters, pre-approved multilingual templates, and surge translation contracts — released simultaneously across all languages, before disasters occur.

Best Practices 6.1, 6.3–6.6 • Policy 7 (Local #1–2, State #2–3, Federal #2–3, #6)

LESSON 2

Trusted Networks Are Primary Infrastructure

HCIR's Language Access Crisis Calls existed years before the fires — a standing network of community organizations, bilingual navigators, ethnic media, and advocates. When the fires hit, that network activated immediately, performing the core functions of emergency management.

84

Organizations & providers participated
in crisis coordination calls

90%

Of Iris Mendoza's (HCIR) referrals routed
through Roots Reborn

0

Formal mandate, agency backing, or
dedicated funding behind this network

POLICY / PRACTICE RESPONSE

Formalize partnerships with existing coordination infrastructure before disasters occur — MOUs, rapid reimbursement mechanisms, and a permanent, funded bilingual navigator workforce. The infrastructure doesn't need to be invented. It needs to be recognized and resourced.

Best Practices 6.2, 6.3, 6.7 • Policy 7 (Local #3–4, State #4–5, Federal #4–5)

Systems Must Fit Reality — and Outlast the Emergency



One-Size-Fits-All Systems Don't Fit Local Realities

Multigenerational households, mixed immigration statuses, informal employment, and cash-based economies are not exceptions — they are the norm for millions of Americans in disaster-prone areas.

Reform FEMA's household definition and documentation rules; adopt privacy-protective policies barring immigration-status inquiries during response.

Best Practices 6.7, 6.8 • Policy 7 (State #5, Federal #1, #4–5)



Recovery Is Long. The Infrastructure Must Be Too.

Government programs have defined end dates. Community need does not. Organizations sustained multi-year recovery work on volunteer goodwill and short-term grants — often staffed by survivors themselves.

Fund a standing bilingual navigator and community health worker workforce; ensure emergency plans address multi-year recovery, not just the acute phase.

Best Practices 6.7, 6.8 • Policy 7 (Local #4, State #1, Federal #1, #5)

Eight Things Agencies Should Do Differently



6.1 Disaster-Speed Language Planning



6.2 Formalize Trusted-Messenger MOUs



6.3 Equip Messengers, Not Just Materials



6.4 Layered, Redundant Communication



6.5 Design for Comprehension Under Stress



6.6 Non-Digital Communication Capacity



6.7 Standing Bilingual Navigator Workforce



6.8 Multilingual Business Centers

A REPLICABLE MODEL

Hawai'i's HI-EMA Language Access Coordinator

After years of advocacy by HCIR and its member organizations, Hawai'i secured a full-time Language Access Coordinator embedded directly within the Hawai'i Emergency Management Agency — the only state in the nation to do so.

- Funded through SB3239 → consolidated into SB2109
- Covers blue-sky (pre-disaster) planning
- Covers grey-sky (active response) planning
- Directly replicable by other states & counties



The legal framework for language access already exists — Title VI, EO 13166. What's missing is enforcement and standing infrastructure.

From Practice to Law



Local Government

Build language access into emergency operations before the next disaster.

Responds to Lessons 1 & 2



State Government

Institutionalize language equity in state emergency law and fund the infrastructure to deliver it.

Responds to all four lessons



Federal Government

Reform aid frameworks to reflect the diversity of American households and codify language equity as a legal obligation.

Responds primarily to Lessons 3 & 4



The Barriers, the Lessons, the Path Forward

These are not separate problems requiring separate solutions. They are one interconnected system of exclusion that requires a coherent, coordinated response. Trusted messengers, bilingual navigators, and grassroots organizations should not exist in spite of the system — they should be resourced and embedded within it.

“The recommendations in this report are actionable. The models exist. The community expertise is here. What remains is the political will to act before the next disaster makes the cost of inaction impossible to ignore.”

Mahalo

Questions & Discussion



Hawai'i Coalition for Immigrant Rights (HCIR) • Ward Research

Full report: Ho'omau Ke Aloha — see also the companion addendum, Kona Low Floods 2026