

FEMA and Partners Rally Massive Effort to Help Lahaina Rebound and Wildfire Survivors Heal

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LAHAINA, Hawaiʻi – In the heart of this fire-ravaged historic town, the sounds of progress have begun to reverberate.

Heavy equipment rumbles and scoops up debris, lifting it into a waiting truck, where it is carefully wrapped to prevent leaks or spills. Then it is hauled to a newly constructed temporary debris storage site.

Crews are clearing the land lot by lot, preparing Lahaina for reconstruction and the return of its residents.

Removing debris from the 5-square-mile burn zone – with the permission of the property owners – is just one visible sign of the massive response to the Aug. 8 wildfires that swept through this coastal town on the island of Maui.

During the past six months, state, local and federal officials, nonprofits and community leaders have helped thousands of displaced survivors find a place to stay, feed their families, and access financial aid, crisis counseling and other services.

These leaders have joined forces to put Lahaina on a path to recovery that preserves its culture and strengthens its sense of community.

Since the wildfires, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has spent more than **\$1.7 billion**, including funding critical projects administered by other federal agencies. Among the achievements:

- A new \$53.7 million temporary school installed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to welcome the children of King Kamehameha III Elementary School, whose classrooms were destroyed in the fire. The school on the north side of



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Lahaina is nearing completion, only three months after work began. Teachers and administrators arrive on March 23 to prepare for 600 students expected to start school on April 1.

- The Army Corps of Engineers completed debris removal on 25 properties in the Upcountry Maui town of Kula, 35 miles away. A separate wildfire destroyed homes located in this mountainous region on the slopes of the Haleakala volcano the same day as the Lahaina fires.
- The General Services Administration is negotiating a lease for a 63-acre site in the Lahaina area to construct 214 temporary housing units and install the necessary infrastructure to support survivors.
- The U.S. Coast Guard raised 96 boats from the harbor, including a commercial submarine.
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency removed more than 220 tons of hazardous materials like paints, solvents, oils and pesticides; 30 tons of lithium batteries from electrified vehicles and also power walls from the burn zone. This allowed crews from the Army Corps of Engineers to come in and remove the remaining debris safely.

The post-wildfire cleanup is being done with an eye to public safety, with vigilant monitoring of air, water and soil quality.

The cleanup respects Native Hawaiian history and the rich, multicultural diversity of Lahaina and Kula. Cultural experts and local cultural advisors were brought in to observe every facet of debris removal on each property in Lahaina and Kula. And, a federal Cultural Protocol Task Force was formed to educate disaster workers and help them understand, respect and integrate local customs and practices in their work helping survivors.

From the beginning, the well-being of survivors was paramount. The wind-fueled wildfires descended on Lahaina so fast that it raced from the hillside above town to the shoreline in less than half an hour. Thousands fled, some with little more than the clothes they were wearing. The community was left traumatized and in need of basic necessities – food, shelter, water, electricity, and so much more.

Gov. Josh Green, Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen and other county leaders mobilized quickly. At the governor's request, President Biden declared a major disaster for Hawaii on Aug. 10, two days after the fires. The declaration cleared the way for addressing immediate needs such as federal assistance to individuals and



households.

FEMA's Disaster Survivor Assistance teams arrived Aug. 11 to help survivors with federal assistance applications and to direct them to food, shelter and other useful information.

On Maui, FEMA set up three Disaster Recovery Centers where survivors could meet with disaster specialists and get referrals to resources. The center at Lahaina Civic Center Gymnasium is still open, offering assistance from several agencies, including the state, FEMA, the U.S. Small Business Administration and Maui County. As of Feb. 4, there were more than **44,400** visits to the centers.

Federal assistance flowed quickly to the survivors. Already, **\$43.7 million** was approved for **7,013** individuals and households that applied for FEMA assistance while SBA approved more than **\$290.7 million** in low-interest disaster loans to homeowners, renters and businesses.

Finding shelter and longer-term housing for survivors is a major challenge, made worse by Maui's limited housing market.

Early on, the state arranged for the American Red Cross to manage emergency sheltering needs by housing survivors in Maui hotels and condos. FEMA funded the effort. The Red Cross has sheltered 8,000 survivors, about two-thirds of the pre-disaster population of Lahaina. To date, there are **4,984** survivors and 300-plus pets in **16** sites. With its partners, the Red Cross has also provided three meals a day to survivors – more than **1.1 million** meals since their program began.

FEMA's priority is to help people move from hotel rooms into longer-term housing, where they could stay for up to 18 months, possibly up to 24 months, if necessary. To that end, FEMA has offered two programs:

- Through the **Rental Assistance** program, **270** households are receiving rent money from FEMA to live in temporary housing units of their choosing. These households have been approved for another three months of rental assistance.
- Under the **Direct Lease** program, FEMA contracts with three property managers to find and manage apartments, condos and other suitable living quarters for leasing to survivors. FEMA pays the property owners directly. FEMA has



secured **1,404** leased and fully furnished properties for survivors. Some **162** households have been placed in these temporary homes.

One survivor, Corinne Bumanglag, said that moving into a longer-term, FEMA-funded temporary home has reduced the anxiety that has haunted her since the wildfires.

On that terrifying day, the sky turned black with smoke and the wind was “the worst I have ever seen in my life.” With power out since the night before and her partner, John, at work, Corinne had no cell phone service as the smell of smoke grew stronger.

She and her three boys, then aged 11, 4 and 7 months, barely escaped the first-floor unit the family was renting from her father. Corinne and John had lived there only two weeks before the wildfires destroyed the family’s two-story residence.

The Red Cross moved the family of five into a condo, but it was a short-term shelter arrangement. They had to pack occasionally in case they were asked to move. “I felt anxious, uncertain,” she said.

The FEMA direct lease program contacted her family and offered a longer-term temporary home about 20 miles from Lahaina, in Wailuku. The family accepted the offer, and earlier this year was able to move into a furnished three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath home.

“It’s for 18 months, but that’s enough time to figure out a plan for the future,” Corinne said. “I am finally happy.”

FEMA officials are in the process of moving other households into temporary direct lease homes, where they can continue to heal and look ahead to the next stage of their lives.

