

# Maui Wild fire Survivors Were Re-Traumatized By Poor Disaster Response, Survey Says

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*I write about travel destinations and the people I meet along the way.*

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LAHAINA, HAWAII - OCTOBER 09: In an aerial view, a recovery vehicle drives past burned structures ...

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For some Lahaina Residents, the response to the wildfire that killed at least 100 people and destroyed more than 2,000 structures nearly a year ago has been worse than the fire itself.

It's a shocking declaration, but one found in [a new survey](#) published by the Hawai'i State Rural Health Association in which they spoke to 2,097 Maui residents, including 1,105 that were directly impacted by the wildfires on August 8, 2023.

Housing issues, inefficient bureaucracy, and disorganization have led to mental health issues for Maui residents, according to responses collected by the survey.

“We had people say that the trauma that happened after the disasters was as great or greater than losing everything in a fire,” [said](#) Lisa Grove, the lead researcher of the Maui Together Wildfire Assessment.

The survey focused on the response by FEMA and the Red Cross and zoomed in heavily on housing issues. It found that 59 percent of survivors have had to move three or more times so far since losing their home, with 1 in 5 people moving 5 or more times.

Residents also spoke of inefficient bureaucracy within the aid groups that left families in limbo for several months or, in some cases, nearly half a year.

“Initially being matched to a house with FEMA and then waiting 3 months to be told it was pulled from the program, to being matched a second time, to waiting again almost 2 months to finally move into the direct lease unit,” one resident recalled. “Almost 5 months of waiting for no reason, after doing everything they said.”





Lahaina, Maui, Thursday, August 11, 2023 - The iconic Banyan tree stands among the rubble of burned ... [+] LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

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The survey's organizers said that the disorganization of the response has also been a problem.

“Getting different people assigned to their cases and then having to go back and tell their stories all over again,” the spokesperson said. “They’re re-traumatized every time they have to tell a story to a stranger.”

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All of these factors contributed to an unstable aftermath, especially those who lost their homes in the fire. More than 6,000 residents [were living in hotels](#) in West Maui in the months after the fire, with [some still there](#) as of this writing.

The housing issue remains an on-going struggle, with some families relocating off Maui due to the unpredictable nature of the future and the lack of affordable housing. Many vacation rentals on the island [are being subsidized by the government](#) as long-term housing for displaced families.

Perhaps the most significant takeaway of the study is the mental health issues residents are enduring, not just of the fire or the aftermath, but both together.

“I do feel like mental health is like a huge issue now, and that should be a focus for a lot of people in recovery efforts,” said one resident. “And now that [some] people have [long-term housing], and they can have time to think, and maybe they’re not working with insurance people every day, I feel like now people are realizing like, ‘Oh my gosh, this fire really affected me.’”

The survey highlighted the struggle to make people aware of the mental health impact of the last year.

“I don’t think anyone’s talked about how many suicides and how many things have happened post-fire, how much depression, how much PTSD,” one resident responded. “Everyone I know that was involved in it or escaping it, that is a friend of mine, is dealing with post-traumatic PTSD.”



One story bringing hope is that the first home has [begun its rebuild](#) in Lahaina; however, [most are not as far along in the process](#).

One study doesn't tell the whole story, but these experiences are never the desired outcome.

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