

MAUI WILDFIRES

A year after Lahaina burned, residents still struggle with housing and job insecurity

The blaze that erupted on Aug. 8 destroyed the historic town and thousands of homes on Maui and hit Hawaii's tourism industry hard.



— Debris removal continues at a former apartment building in the Lahaina wildfire impact zone Friday in Lahaina, Hawaii. Mario Tama / Getty Images

Aug. 5, 2024, 11:10 AM HST

By Alicia Victoria Lozano

A year after wildfires tore through Lahaina, Hawaii, restaurateur Qiana Di Bari is still packing up trash bags, each filled with smoke-damaged belongings, and carrying them out of her home one at a time in a painstaking effort to rebuild.

It's a ritual that continues to play out across west Maui after the [Aug. 8](#) fires killed at least 102 people and destroyed the former capital of the kingdom of Hawaii.

The home Di Bari shares with her husband, Italian-born Michele, and their daughter, 13, was one of only four on their street to survive the inferno, she said.

Di Bari is one of thousands of residents attempting to rebuild her home and business amid a flurry of instability.

NBC News spoke with a dozen people affected by the fire and each described experiencing an unrelenting cycle of housing and job insecurity that has [compounded their trauma](#).

Two families said they have bounced from hotel to hotel, their stays extended through FEMA until next year. Others have moved in with relatives to save money. One person left Maui after being priced out of rental units.

The impact of the fire, one of three that erupted on that windy day last summer, has reached beyond the shores of Maui, devastating Hawaii's tourism economy and costing the state more than \$1 billion in lost revenue.

The road to recovery from a massive fire like the one that leveled Lahaina is never quick. Rubble has to be cleared, remains identified and soil and water tested long before any construction can start. Then there are insurance and legal questions.

After a 2018 fire killed 85 people and destroyed the town of Paradise, California, it took more than four years for some survivors to receive their [insurance payouts](#). Homes and businesses continue to be rebuilt and new foundations laid.



— Michele and Qiana Di Bari in their restaurant, Sale Pepe. Courtesy Qiana and Michele Di Bari

Today, many Lahaina residents who lost their homes are still displaced as they scramble from one temporary shelter to another. “Even a year later, people are still in the unknown,” said Jamie Nahoo’ikaika, a host at Di Bari’s popular restaurant near Front Street, Sale Pepe, which burned to the ground. “Everybody is still waiting, and you wonder why it’s taking so long.”

She is counting the days until Sale Pepe reopens so she can go back to work. In the meantime, she and her husband, Jaret-Levi, a Lahaina native and head custodian at King Kamehameha III Elementary, transformed her mother’s garage into a studio for themselves, their 3-year-old son and 9-month-old daughter.

Sale Pepe will reopen in a new location sometime in the fall, Di Bari said, and she intends to rehire a handful of employees, including Nahoo’ikaika.

The Di Baris have stitched together financing for the restaurant through insurance claims, small business loans and a GoFundMe campaign started by their New York-based creative director.





— The Di Baris' popular restaurant near Front Street, Sale Pepe. Courtesy Qiana and Michele Di Bari

"We wanted to send a message that Lahaina is worth staying for," said Di Bari, who once managed the hip hop group Tribe Called Quest. The 12 residents interviewed by NBC News all said they intend to return to Lahaina as soon as they can afford to rebuild their businesses and homes.

"The true thing about Lahaina people is you cannot take Lahaina people out of Lahaina," Nahoo'ikaika said.

Tourism remains down

The fire not only displaced thousands of people, it threatened to erase the cultural and historic center of Hawaii's former kingdom and those who inherited its legacy.

The sidewalks and corners where generations of families "talked stories," as locals say, were wiped out in mere hours.

It also devastated Maui's tourism-dependent economy and caused more than \$6 billion in damage, according to a [state report](#).

Many tourists postponed or canceled trips to Maui even as [local businesses encouraged](#) people to visit areas not impacted by the fire. The cancellations cost Maui \$9 million in revenue each day since the fire, according to Hawaii Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism.

"Lahaina was one of busiest tracts in all of Hawaii," said James Tokioka, director of the state's tourism and economic development department. "It went from that to nothing."

In all, nearly \$10.2 million in grants has been awarded to more than 1,000 businesses in Lahaina, his office said.



— A man walks past wildfire wreckage in Lahaina, Hawaii, on Aug. 9, 2023.

Tiffany Kidder Winn via AP file

Across the island, tourism is still down. The first half of 2024 saw a nearly 24% drop in visitors to Maui from 1.5 million people in 2023 to 1.1 million this year. Spending slipped from \$3.47 billion in the first half of 2023 to [\\$2.64 billion](#) in the same period this year.

Maui's [unemployment rate](#) is higher than neighboring islands at 4.5% compared to 3% statewide.

Residents remain displaced

A [recent survey](#) of Maui residents by the Hawai'i State Rural Health Association found that 72% of residents said they were either directly or indirectly impacted by the fire.

Of those who were directly affected, 71% said they cut back on groceries to save money, and 59% said they have moved at least three times since the fire.

“It really punctuates the trauma and the sense of uncertainty,” said Lisa Grove, the study's lead researcher. “It’s lots of folks who have been there for generations – it’s people with the deepest roots.”

[Filipinos](#) comprised the largest share of people living in Lahaina. They settled in the area generations earlier while working at the sugar cane plantations and quickly became the second-largest racial group in the state, according to the 2020 census.

The state, FEMA and other agencies are working to build some 1,044 transitional housing units for the more than 3,000 households displaced by the fire, Gov. Josh Green said last week.

A [\\$4 billion settlement](#) of more than 600 lawsuits against the state, county and utilities reached last week will help pay for rebuilding.

Despite the progress, Kalama McEwen, whose neighborhood was [ground zero](#) for the deadly inferno, said he's still trying to piece together his life.

His family of seven moved in with his in-laws after their home was destroyed. His businesses, a mechanic shop and a tow truck company, were underinsured and he was unable to recoup losses, he said.

The combined households can add up to more than 20 people on any given day. Sometimes relatives wait in line to use the bathroom and take turns sleeping on the floor. McEwen built a shack in the backyard and ran an extension cord for electricity to create a small, private space, but he said the accommodations are untenable.



— A rainbow is seen from Put Kukui mountain over burned cars and buildings in Lahaina, Hawaii, on Aug. 13, 2023. Mengshin Lin for The Washington Post via Getty Images file

One of his sons works at a local resort, and he and his wife escape there with their youngest children every few weeks to get a break. “We were one of the lucky ones,” he said, speaking poolside from the hotel where his son works. “At least we had somewhere to go. We lost everything but we’re still here.”

Maui resident Cindy Canham worked at Whaler’s Locker on Front Street in Lahaina since 2018, selling rare and collectible items, like hand-carved pocket knives and locally made jewelry. Before that, she worked at a shop across the street for 35 years.

“Lahaina was a loss for everybody on the island,” she said. “Even if you’ve lived here just six months, you’ve got a Lahaina memory.”

She moved to Maui in 1978 from Texas in what was meant to be a summer vacation before starting college. She never left. Canham met her late husband a year later near the [historic banyan tree](#) that was nearly destroyed in the fire.

Whaler's Locker, which opened in 1971, was destroyed in the fire. Although the owner sells items online and at local markets a few times a week, there isn't enough work to keep Canham on the payroll.

Canham, who lives about 25 miles away in the town of Kihei, wasn't eligible for federal assistance beyond unemployment benefits because she doesn't live in Lahaina. Now, for the first time since Jimmy Carter was president, she wonders if she'll be forced to leave Maui.

"It was my town," she said of Lahaina. "Yet I wasn't considered a fire survivor because I didn't lose my home. It's hard for some people to understand what I feel."



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