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## California puts \$25 million toward worker safety outreach amid fire rebuilding efforts



Volunteers, members of the Day Labor Fire Brigade from the Pasadena Community Job Center, clean up neighborhood streets in Pasadena. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

**By Suhauna Hussain**

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March 18, 2025 5:43 PM PT

California officials on Tuesday announced \$25 million in funding to help community organizations educate workers about their rights and workplace safety.

Los Angeles area organizations were prioritized for a chunk of the funds — \$6 million — to support workers involved in [cleanup and rebuilding efforts](#) after the devastating Palisades and Eaton fires.



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California's Department of Industrial Relations will allocate funds to 89 community organizations across the state, with some 21 in Los Angeles. The funding is part of a program called the California Workplace Outreach Project, first launched in 2021 to address COVID-19-related workplace risks.

“California is implementing a unique model that leverages trusted local messengers to communicate directly with workers,” said California Labor Secretary Steward Knox in a Tuesday statement.

Organizations may be able to renew the funding for a second year, with a total of \$49 million set aside for a two-year funding cycle, according to the Department of Industrial Relations.

Fire-damaged properties can pose dangers to workers, rife with hazardous waste and

harmful chemicals. With many immigrant workers having lost jobs as nannies, gardeners, housekeepers, plumbers and pool cleaners as a result of the fires, advocates say some may be forced to undertake dangerous fire cleanup jobs, at times without proper training or equipment.

At the same time, these low-wage workers might also grapple with problems of wage theft, discrimination, retaliation, anti-immigrant sentiment or other issues, said Nancy Zuniga, health program manager at a group that supports day laborers called the Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California, also known as IDEPSCA.

The outreach is a first step to inform workers of their rights, Zuniga said at a Tuesday morning news conference held at IDEPSCA's office in Pico-Union.

"These workers are often left out of all safety nets," Zuniga said. "We are happy to be part of this effort, but we know more is needed."

In the aftermath of the 2018 Woolsey fire, IDEPSCA [studied its effect on domestic workers](#) in Malibu. More than half of the nearly 200 workers surveyed said they permanently lost their jobs. Many reported instances of being expected to clean up ash, soot and debris without proper training and equipment, and dealt with lingering financial and emotional consequences of the fire for at least two years after.



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[A report by UC Berkeley researchers](#) examining California's community-based approach to COVID-19 safety efforts surveyed workers and found they were often

distrustful of government entities. Partnering with community organizations was “a crucial strategy for addressing high volumes of workplace issues that traditional regulatory approaches cannot fully tackle alone,” the report said.

California Labor Commissioner Lilia Garcia-Brower said that because many cases of wage theft rely on active witnesses rather than violations documented on paper, community groups are essential in keeping workers engaged in the process, which can take months or years.

“If we just waited in our office to process claims, we wouldn’t be doing our jobs,” Garcia-Brower said. “Outreach is not fluff, it’s foundational to enforcement.”

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