



# As workers tackle the dangerous job of cleaning up after the LA fires, can the state keep them safe?



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David Slater, right, clears the driveway from his home, spared from the Eaton Fire in Altadena, on Jan. 12, 2025. Photo by Ethan Swope, AP Photo

## IN SUMMARY

The LA fires have left domestic workers and day laborers jobless. They may soon be hired for wildfire cleanup work, where they can be exposed to ash and other toxins.

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Anabel Garcia's eyes burned and her breathing was labored and dry as she cleared debris from burned down properties in Sonoma County.

In late 2017, the Tubbs Fire had just scythed its way through towns and crops and Garcia, a vineyard worker, was out of a job. So she joined on with a contractor providing post-fire cleanup services. But that proved painful and dangerous.

“We were sick with throat and skin problems,” she said, of herself and the scores of other immigrant workers who took cleanup gigs in the aftermath of the fire. “There were many consequences we had later, in order to keep working.”

Garcia was cleaning up after what was, at the time, the most destructive fire in California history, which killed 22 people and torched 5,600 structures. The Palisades and Eaton fires that started last week have already caused nearly double that damage and as Los Angeles turns its [eye toward recovery](#), worker advocates and state regulators are concerned about the potential hazards to cleanup workers like Garcia.

The cleanup is essential: The debris must be cleared and the ash-covered houses cleaned before any reconstruction is possible. Much of that work will fall to a cadre of immigrant laborers.

Some are already employed as housekeepers and may be asked by homeowners to clear ash from a damaged house, workers' advocates said. Others will likely be the gardeners, handymen and other domestic service workers reeling [from lost income during the fires](#), available for work.

“As those big areas of the city that have been impacted get opened up and handed back to property owners, those workers are going to be, no question, in massive demand,” said Kevin Riley, director of the Labor and Occupational Safety and Health program at UCLA. “They're a critical backbone to reconstruction efforts.”

Fire recovery workers can face [numerous hazards](#), including structurally unsound buildings, toxic gases, exposed electrical wiring, cancer-causing chemicals and ash, soot and dust which can damage the lungs when inhaled, according to the state Division of Occupational Safety and Health.



From left, homeowners Christine Meinders and Sohrab Nafici, return to their fire-ravaged neighborhood in the aftermath of the Eaton Fire in Altadena on Jan. 10, 2025. Photo by Jae C. Hong, AP Photo

State environmental agencies usually remove toxic substances that have seeped into the ground, and certified contractors are required to mitigate asbestos and lead risks, Riley said. Those workers tend to be trained for the hazards.

But he's concerned about anyone hired for a less formal cleanup job, whether directly by a homeowner or by one of a [growing number of loosely regulated](#) cleanup-and-recovery contractors that [chase climate-driven disasters](#) across the country.

Mike Wilson, senior safety engineer at Cal/OSHA, told the Occupational Safety and Health

Standards Board in a public meeting on Thursday that the agency is planning to do outreach about the risks of those jobs.

“We’re also paying attention to the need for getting in front of the next phase of this incident, which is going to be contractors moving into these areas, and what we’ve seen historically, hiring day laborers to do cleanup and salvage work, and often with little to no protection,” Wilson said.

## **Safety training**

On Tuesday morning, day laborers and community volunteers mingled at the Pasadena Community Job Center. The day laborers, who typically wait for work requests from homeowners or contractors at Home Depots or street corners, were instead preparing to lead efforts to clean up the debris left by strong winds.

Dozens of men and women shoveled, raked and swept neighborhood streets where winds had toppled over trees, branches and debris that could spark or carry embers. By the end of the day, they had filled a convoy of 15 dump trucks with debris.

The National Day Laborer Organizing Network, which runs the job center, helped organize the volunteers from the community and from throughout the county to clean up throughout the week. The effort highlights the role immigrant workers play helping their communities recover from disasters, said Manuel Vicente, director of the network’s Radio Jornalera program.

“It was a way to respond to the rhetoric about immigrants happening now, the rain of lies about immigrants that have been stigmatizing us,” he said. “That we’re a community that if someone falls, we extend a hand to help them up.”



Day laborer Jorge Medina cleans up vegetation debris south of the Altadena Eaton Fire burn area in Pasadena on Jan. 15, 2025. Photo by Joel Angel Juarez for CalMatters

In anticipation of its members being picked up for cleanup jobs, the network has deployed an OSHA-certified trainer at the job center to teach workers how to identify hazards in burned homes. It also plans to send staff to local Home Depots to hand out pamphlets and educational materials to day laborers.

The network has done similar training in hurricane-battered regions on the East Coast and in Texas and Louisiana.

Officials at the LA County Department of Public Health have been distributing N95 masks to workers centers.

Alice Berliner, director of the department's office of worker health and safety, pointed to surveys of gardeners, housekeepers and other domestic service workers conducted by advocacy groups after the 2018 Woolsey Fire in Malibu.

“Based on the fact that they were exposed to toxic debris, handling unsafe materials without proper equipment,” Berliner said, “we’re very likely to see a similar dynamic with this upcoming cleanup.”

## **Cleaning up**

In Sonoma County after the Tubbs Fire, Christy Lubin remembers two kinds of disaster responses.

In one, the state sent specialized contractors to remove toxic substances from charred homes. Most of the workers who came to the Graton Day Labor Center in the county’s wine country were shut out from those jobs, lacking [the state-required hazardous material certifications](#), said Lubin, the center’s director.

In the other, the town flooded with other reconstruction contractors from around the country.

“(The contractors) were bringing in a lot of immigrant workers, especially a lot of women, who got hired to go in and do especially interior building cleanup, smoke damage cleanup,” Lubin said. “Those contractors were picking up groups of workers, meeting them on a corner, driving them in a van to these workplaces where they were sent into these buildings without the proper training, without the proper personal protective equipment.”

It can be tough, said Riley of UCLA, to enforce safety regulations in those disaster zones.

“It’s a bit of a wild west situation at times,” he said. “Just because of how massive the work is and how varied the worksites and how spread out they are.”

Garcia, the former vineyard employee, said she found her cleanup job through a Facebook ad for a restoration contractor that said it was working for an insurance company. Hundreds of workers who needed income after the fires responded, she said, and the contractors didn’t seem to care about their immigration status.

The workers boarded 15-passenger vans to burned homes, businesses and even public buildings, she said. Sometimes she worked 10-hour days. She recalled being paid somewhere between \$13 and \$15 an hour.

For a few weeks, Garcia cleaned a hospital clinic strewn with blood and syringes before then cleaning homes, clearing and bagging up ashes and debris.

“Everything was covered in ashes,” she said. “Everything you saw was black.”

She said workers were given gloves and a helmet, but nothing to protect their bodies or cover their shoes. They only received masks the first two days, then had to reuse them, she said.

### **‘What we need is to work’**

Experiences [like those](#) drove Garcia — now a house-cleaner and a board member at the day labor center — and other worker advocates to push California lawmakers to better protect workers.

The state has passed new regulations requiring employers to protect workers from wildfire smoke or prohibiting them from forcing workers to be in evacuation zones.

And in July, some domestic workers will be newly covered under state workplace safety laws. There’s an exception for those hired privately by homeowners, but Cal/OSHA spokesperson Daniel Lopez told CalMatters in an email that anyone who is hired for cleanup — no matter the employer — is already covered by a [slew of wildfire-specific safety regulations](#).

A state advisory committee on domestic labor in 2022 [recommended against](#) hiring people commonly employed for household or yard work to clean up soot or ash after a wildfire, “as this may require specialized equipment and training.”



Day laborer Oscar Hernandez, right, cleans up vegetation debris south of the Altadena Eaton Fire burn area in Pasadena on Jan. 15, 2025. Photo by Joel Angel Juarez for CalMatters

It doesn't erase their willingness to do the jobs.

On Tuesday morning in Pasadena a handful of day laborers waited for gigs at the corner of Villa and Fair Oaks, three miles south of homes the Eaton Fire had burned one week earlier.

They perked up as cars slowed past the street. Work has been slow all season, they said, even before the fires destroyed many household jobs.

Marcelo Esteban said he knew that there might be work coming to clean up or rebuild burnt down communities, though he expected homeowners to turn to day laborers only after they've gotten help from insurance companies or the government.

He doesn't think much about the risks that work might carry.



“If someone needs help, we can use masks,” he said. “Someone is going to do the work anyway. What we need is to work. It doesn’t matter what.”

*CalMatters reporter Wendy Fry contributed to this story.*

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By [Yue Stella Yu](#) JANUARY 16, 2025



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