

Maui wildfires destroy carriers' homes

The tragic wildfire that struck Lahaina on the island of Maui in Hawaii on Aug. 8 killed hundreds of people—with dozens more still unaccounted for—and destroyed much of the historic town. No postal employees were among the dead, USPS reported, but seven lost their homes, including three letter carriers. Several carriers narrowly escaped the flames. The Downtown Post Office in Lahaina was destroyed.

The fires in Lahaina and several other parts of Hawaii spread out of control due to drought conditions combined with high winds from a nearby hurricane, as well as potential human error.

John Kim, a carrier in Lahaina for 28 years, didn't see a fire that day, only the wind. "The winds were howling; branches were falling," he said. Kim, a member of Lahaina Branch 5306, heard on the news that morning some fires had popped up, but that they had been extinguished. He went to work like any other day and didn't see any fire or smoke.

But more fires were spreading, and his supervisor called him back to the office from his route in the afternoon. That evening, he clocked out and tried to go home, but was turned away by authorities. His neighborhood had been struck by the fire and he wasn't allowed in. "I ended up going to the local beach park because I couldn't get back home," he said, and spent the night at a shopping area. Kim soon learned that his home, and most of his route, had been destroyed by the massive fire. His wife was not home at the time and was uninjured.

A month later, authorities still hadn't let him in the affected area because of the ongoing recovery of bodies and the presence of toxic materials left by the fire. "I haven't seen my place up close," Kim said.

Branch 5306 President **Josh Doherty** said the carriers of Lahaina are recovering with the help of the NALC Disaster Relief Foundation and their fellow NALC members around the country.

"The outreach has been absolutely incredible," he said. "It's been an eye-opening experi-

ence to realize what a vast network of caring people we are part of."

Doherty wasn't in town the day of the wildfire, but he received some urgent messages from carriers about the blaze. He called the postmaster at one carrier's station and told him to call the carriers back to the office from their routes because their lives were in danger from the fire and smoke.

Wildfires have been frequent over the last few years in the drought-stricken Hawaiian Islands, Doherty said, and residents have gotten used to them, so they might not have noticed how dangerous this fire was until it was too late. "It was kind of like the boy who cried wolf," he said. "We've had so many fires in the past five years."

While most of the burned-out areas remain closed, mail delivery continues in the rest of Lahaina, providing a critical link to the outside world for people whose power and internet service were cut off for a while. "I'm delivering their medications," Doherty said. "I'm delivering their newspaper so they know what's going on. It's a great reminder of how important we are."

Every year, nature brings reminders of how letter carriers help each other as well as their customers in the wake of natural disasters like the Lahaina fire. The NALC Disaster Relief Foundation (DRF) stands ready to help.

DRF officers and directors quickly identify carriers who are affected by disasters and give them aid as soon as possible. The aid might include supplies such as water, food, clothing and postal uniform items. Working closely with local branch leaders, DRF helps members whose homes are uninhabitable find temporary housing and transportation, as well as apply for DRF grants.



NALC Disaster Relief Foundation

Make a donation by sending a check or money order to:
NALC Disaster Relief Foundation
100 Indiana Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20001-2144



The fires in Lahaina



This time was no different. President of the Disaster Relief Foundation Christina Vela Davidson was immediately on the phone with Doher, Honolulu Branch 860 President **Howard Komine** and Hawaii State Association President **Alvin Matsumura**, collecting names and phone numbers to help with emergency funds for members in need and to check on all of the members.

NALC created the DRF in 2018 to ease the process of getting help to members affected by disasters. Numerous branches had asked NALC to establish a mechanism that would facilitate getting donations, grants and other assistance to carriers.

As the year's end approaches, letter carriers might consider donating to DRF, NALC President Brian L. Renfroe said.

"The foundation is ready to provide rapid help for our affected brothers and sisters," Renfroe said. "But it can't do its job without our support."

The foundation provides aid in the form of supplies or grants, and it maintains a trained volunteer network to respond quickly to disasters. Grants are provided for property damage sustained to a primary residence, automobile or personal property from causes such as hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, wildfires, earthquakes or severe storms, and are provided only to NALC members.

"Thanks again to those who have donated," Davidson said. "It has

helped our members who have received assistance get back on their feet."

Donations can be sent to: NALC Disaster Relief Foundation, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144; or made by credit card at nalc.org/nrdfdonate. The foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization; contributions to the DRF may be tax-deductible. It is recommended that you consult your tax advisor.

Donations go directly to individual carriers or to branches needing assistance—no administrative costs are deducted.

Donations given before Nov. 5 will be recognized in the December issue of *The Postal Record*.

Members do not have to wait for emergency relief or insurance claims to be settled to apply. Applications must be received within 120 days from the date of the natural disaster, unless the applicant can provide sufficient reasons for a delay. The application for a relief grant is on the foundation's website, nalc.org/disaster.

"If you have not donated yet, please find it in your heart to help your fellow sisters and brothers affected by a natural disaster. You never know when it might be you who needs some help," Davidson said.

"Let's all donate to the Disaster Relief Foundation now so that it can be ready when disaster strikes," President Renfroe said. **PR**



Top: The aftermath of the fires in Lahaina

Above: A letter carrier in an LLV tries to navigate through smoke and wind