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Lahaina resident and aid hub volunteer blasts government response to Maui fire disaster

Our reporters
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Reporters with the World Socialist Web Site spoke this week to Kalea, a Lahaina, Maui, resident and volunteer, who has been helping at neighborhood resource hubs where displaced residents from the August 8, 2023 fire have been obtaining essential items, such as water, food, clothing and baby supplies. The fire has displaced some 8,000-10,000 people and killed at least 98 people, according to official figures, although many residents believe this is a vast undercount. Kalea's name has been changed to protect her anonymity.

WSWS: It's been over seven weeks since the fires, nearly two months with little movement. How are people handling the situation?

Kalea: Everyone is on edge. They're more driven by anger, not even able to be sad right now.

I'm a resident. I had non-traditional housing, so I didn't have a home that I lost like a lot of the people here.

[Kalea was overcome by tears.] You know, I don't cry for me, I cry for everyone else. I mean, it's daily when I have to hear people say 'Red Cross did this, FEMA did this.' You know, or it's just their own landlords over here. That's why I don't even understand why landlords here in Lahaina are kicking out their tenants, so that they can then sign up for the county housing. They raise the rent and sign up for the county housing program and get paid that way. Because then it's doubled. Now, the county needs to just put a stop to it and just tell them, "Wait a minute. All these years, you've been charging \$2,000 a month, and then all of a sudden, it's \$4,000?" I mean, they should be policing that kind of crap.

And there is a moratorium on landlord and tenant disputes and things. That doesn't make sense. Now, you know, on their side, say if the landlord has family members who've been displaced because their homes have burned down, and some have like 10 families they're related to, they would want to use their residence, right? But then, what do you do? You have one tenant in there, and they have 10 families. What do you do?

WSWS: How difficult has it been to receive financial support?

Kalea: Well, there is not enough. And it's not fairly distributed. Or they continue to add on criteria and more criteria to get the support. At first, if you went right after the fire and went through all of this, it was easier to get help, no questions asked. But now

it's been six, seven weeks and now you need an ID, you need a letter from your landlord.

And then they have to come to your homes for inspection. They have just so many things you have to do, and it's typical. But in this kind of circumstance, my opinion is the officials should say, "If you have a home, then you get this much for disaster relief. If you lost your home, you get this much." It just makes it easier. The only thing they should be asking for maybe would be your ID. So, they know that they're giving it to John and not to John Sr., but other than that it shouldn't be so hard.

They are requiring proof, a lease or a letter. But again, when you're under a non-traditional set up where you don't have a lease and they're just taking cash, because they're not legally paying taxes on it, then what do you do? And then the landlord won't sign the paper because then it's a paper trail that they took money and didn't pay their taxes. That's kind of what happened to me.

WSWS: What about the \$700 per household promised by President Biden. We were told this was only dispersed to some people.

Kalea: There's more people without that \$700 than there are with it. With COVID, they gave out \$1,200, then \$1,400. Why can't we just do that? This is only about 6,000 to 10,000 people here. You know what I mean? And yes, every house is worth about \$600,000 to \$1 million. But even if you count every single house, how many people were living in it? Just count the house as a couple of million dollars. I know, I know, I say that as if the money is water, but they [the government] gave themselves \$3 trillion in the bailout and forgave themselves! And who did they bail out? The businesses! So, you can't even bail out your taxpayers? The ones that gave you the \$3 trillion?

The war in Ukraine is costing so much, and there's so many other places the money is going but not to the people who need it. But yeah, my opinion is stop helping the other countries right now. I'm sorry. But you've also got to pay attention to our country. Look at all the natural disasters in our country that's happening, all the fires, earthquakes, floods, and you're still fishing out money.

At the hubs we are getting people food. But the next thing is financial aid and health. The next would be housing, but they need

the financial support so they can find themselves housing. They go together.

Do you know what the rent is like over here? You start with the rent, add the food on top of that. And then your utilities. So that's probably like \$4,000 a month.

WSWS: Can you describe the neighborhood resource hubs and what has been the government response to the needs of residents?

Kalea: When you visit the hubs at Kahului Park, Sheraton, Pohaku, Kohana, that's all community run. And it started that way. Now we have some county and state donors coming in. But most of us when we started, at least 75 percent of the items coming in were just donations from regular residents and very small nonprofit organizations. Also, a lot of farmers are dropping off food donations.

All of us are workers. We are the ones running these hubs. Yeah, we are all workers. We are not retirees. But when it comes down to your mental, emotional state of mind, the employers could care less.

Two weeks we had to wait. You're going to finally drop water in two weeks? I mean, what is that? Ten days? Yeah, so let me tell you this. Residents in the community blasted the county, blasted the Water Department here. We asked them several times, and they're like, "We're in a drought, we can't do this."

But we learned that despite telling us this, that they had opened the fire hydrants, letting the water run for weeks because the reservoir is too full. So, when they tell me, "drought, drought, drought," that's a bunch of BS. You have the water out there, and that's fresh water because when it comes down from the mountain and into the reservoir, it is fresh water. But by the time it comes through here, it may pick up the toxins and things like that.

WSWS: The officials say that all the soil tests at the schools and the drinking water and air quality are fine.

Kalea: What is the criteria for "fine"? That's what they don't know. What's the criteria? Yeah, one point below "danger"? And then, what did you test? How come they didn't print out the federal test results that they did for the state and city? Let the people decide where they want to move. They want to stay here in Lahaina, but if it's not safe, then they should have that information so that they can make the choice for themselves.

I know things are not okay, because you take somebody who's a little sensitive like myself, and I can tell you it's not okay. This whole weekend I've been struggling with respiratory issues. And that's just the basic dust ash, but you know that there's more than dust and ash within that. All the toxins that spilled on the ground, right? We've got benzene and other oils and things that burn. And then people think the ocean is clean too. And it's crazy as it is basic science.

I may be the exception to the rule, but I'm hoping that it doesn't rain because this stuff is very toxic. And then, if it doesn't rain enough, then it's even worse because it'll just create clouds of dust. Then if it doesn't rain, it won't catch that dust and put it back down into the ground. It'll just go up and spread it all around.

WSWS: What about the schools?

Kalea: There wasn't enough pressure on the DOE (Department of Education) to do what we wanted them to do. We wanted them

to open up a school over here. But they went for the easiest thing possible, which is to open the Citizens Church [seven miles north in Napili-Honokowai] because they were already willing to do it, and they had the facilities also. But again, they're always about taking the easy way out. That means not spending money, right? And then they dispersed the teachers all over the island. They didn't do it in a coordinated way.

WSWS: What are the conditions and costs of living here? Several people have described a great housing shortage and cramped living situations, where landlords "chop up" homes into many dwellings, renting out small areas of space for exorbitant prices.

Kalea: If you are paying \$1,000, you should have so many square feet of livable space—livable space that does not include closets. I mean, you should be able to put a twin bed in there and comfortably walk around it. If these officials would go into these houses and inspect them, there would be many issues. But because there's such a housing shortage here, they don't care if people are being housed. They're going to turn the other way.

WSWS: What do you think about the official numbers of deceased? And what about the undocumented immigrants?

Kalea: The official numbers are so obviously wrong, so obviously wrong. Yeah, look in one square mile of the place. How many people are in there? Many aren't officially counted. Just look at documents of taxpayers alone, you can see how much and then you add in, you know, another couple of percentage for people who didn't pay the taxes [tenants renting under the table]. First it was over 115 dead and then 97! That's ridiculous.

WSWS: We have encountered so many people who are afraid to speak out, why is this?

Kalea: Here, it is tied to your job. It's who you know and what you've done. If you hurt someone's feelings or stepped on their toes, then they're going to make it hell for you at your job.

WSWS: Why do you think the state and federal officials are responding in this way?

Kalea: The officials are responding this way because they're going to go bankrupt. And most of these guys should be in jail. They broke so many laws. In fact, it should go all the way up to murder.

I mean, it was just so negligent what they did, now that people are following their orders. They're not as bad as the people giving the orders. Herman Andaya, the former Emergency Response manager, resigned because he said what he did was correct [in not sounding the sirens that day]. So, you already admitted that you're an idiot, and you should go to jail.

At least make these officials work in a damn hub. Now we're doing all of this. We were hauling everything. Make them understand what it's like not to have water.



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