

Voices from Lahaina: Residents languish with little relief, fear health risks

Our reporters
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October 8 will mark two months since extreme winds from Hurricane Dora made landfall in Maui, causing a series of fires throughout the island. Downed power lines and strong winds sparked one the deadliest fires in over 100 years in Lahaina located in West Maui.

The Lahaina Fire alone burned over 2,170 acres and destroyed an estimated 2,300 structures, 86 percent of which were residential. Official reports have identified 98 deaths, what many residents state is a vast undercount.

After two months, residents of Lahaina are still without relief. On October 4, Maui City Council held a Disaster, Resilience, International Affairs, and Planning Committee meeting to give an update on recovery for the thousands of impacted residents in Lahaina. Josiah Nishita, Deputy Managing Director of the Department of Management, gave no definitive answer on the lack of aid. He stated, “The office of recovery is still in the process of getting established.” Many survivors are demanding meetings to be held in Lahaina where many residents remain or nearby in hotels just East of the burn zone.

Although the meeting room was largely empty given the lack of public advertising, those who testified in-person or online spoke to the enormous opposition and ongoing catastrophe thousands of Lahaina residents are still facing. Speakers lamented the lack of housing relief, economic impacts and overall ongoing health and environmental impacts from the fire.

One resident said, “The idea that the disaster happened two months ago is misleading. It is still happening and could grow to be much larger with the first rain over Lahaina, when a significant rain either from a storm or a low pressure system, which this season comes to Lahaina if the ash has not been secured in place it will be mobilized by storm water, contaminate the groundwater, washed into the ocean, destroying your shore ecosystems impact ocean based food supplies and impose long term health and environmental hazards and cleanup issues.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed people at distribution

hubs throughout Maui who spoke on their experiences the day of the fire, as well as the conditions they, and so many other residents, are still facing.

Dan lost his home during the fire, “Most of us did not know there was a hurricane going on. At 12:30 in the morning, I found out there was a hurricane. And at 2:30 am winds started coming hard. Things were flying everywhere in the back where we were staying. The wind was going so hard. It was so loud. And all the wires here weren’t more stable than the ones higher up. And it was moving. If this wind wasn’t going to stop anytime soon, the poles would be coming down, and that’s what happened.

“I’m sure sometime between 5:30-6:15 am, before you get to Lahaina Intermediate School the pole fell down, wires came off. That started the fire. After about 1.5 hours, it was contained. The video I took here was at 6:13 am.”

Driven by hurricane force winds, and possibly more downed power lines, reports indicate the fire flared up again about an hour later. It barreled down the hillside toward the ocean and incinerated nearly everything in its path, including the town of Lahaina.

Hawaii Electric stated that the initial fire sparked by its downed power line was extinguished and claims that there is no information about a “second fire” that would go on to burn down Lahaina at the base of the hill. The attempt to draw a clear distinction between supposedly two separate fires is outrageous given the high levels of winds and amount of flammable plant debris that borders the hillsides around the town.

Dan continued, “Objects were flying through my car. I knew something wasn’t right because my kids had an appointment on the other side, and my two jobs were canceled.

“We all headed out toward Kahului because there was no wind over there. In 30 minutes, we got up there. People were

scrambling everywhere. People were saying, 'I didn't get a call.' My dogs were locked at the house. And at Ma'alaea on the other side of Lahaina, they shut down the road so nobody could come into Lahaina from this side or that side.

"I wasn't ready with my documents and needed to get my two dogs. Since they locked Ma'alaea, I went around on another road. It was so busy. Two and a half hours later, I reached Kaanapali, and it was locked down. I was about 20 yards away from the fire when I got up here to get my dogs and my documents.

"I was so glad I did not get stuck in town, that I did not go to work. They canceled work at both of my jobs. It would have been difficult to come back up to get my stuff. Most of the people down in town did not make it because of the gridlock.

"Poles fell down and blocked the access road to the highway, so it was blocked, and the fires were everywhere. You could only go toward the fire, or through the fire and go into the water. My partner, she doesn't have any swimming skills, and there were many people like that. Some didn't jump into the water because they were scared. Which are you going to choose? The fire or the water?

Gerry and his wife have been coming to the Pohaku distribution hub. Gerry also described his experience on the day of the fire. He emphasized the overall lack of communication from the government on relief as well as the need for housing and further relief given the reality that many families' cost of living has more than doubled overnight and many have lost their jobs.

Edna has lived in Lahaina for over 10 years. She lost her home in the fires. She raised concern over the toxicity of Lahaina. "We are living in a hotel right now. I don't think they are going to rebuild this for 2-3 years. They said come over here [to the hotels near Pohaku Park] because there [Lahaina] it is toxic."

Edna and her family were recently allowed to visit their home and sift through the ash. "I cannot be there for 30 minutes or 20 minutes standing there looking through things. I cannot save what I cannot save. When we go through our things, they give us the full PPE and then after that we wash ourselves 2 or 3 times with shampoo. They told us to throw out all our clothes. The environmental agency and the government tell us to throw mostly everything away. Only mirrors and things like leather can be washed or cleaned, they say."

Edna also expressed opposition to the reopening of the schools within Lahaina beginning on October 16, "No," she said. "The air quality! That's number one! The air quality for the kids.

They are breathing it. Their immune system is getting kicked over time, they will get sick over time."

Maricel described the trauma from witnessing the fires. She also described the difficulty her two kids experience having been displaced from school, the toxicity of her home and continued economic impacts her family faces.

Janeo was at his home in Lahaina as the fire spread through town. He and his family evacuated with their neighbors. Janeo and his family members all lost their jobs due to the destruction and have been frequenting the distribution hubs for food and supplies. He said, "I'm still devastated by the loss of other people and people's family and friends...Why didn't they turn on the siren to alert everyone?"

Cathy used to work as a taxi driver in Lahaina. "I saw a whole family die in their home in Lahaina. I saw their roof on fire. Many people saw the fire over here and didn't understand that the wind would reach their homes. They didn't understand how the wind would spread the fire so fast. I saw their pictures at the Lahaina Memorial. The fire was everywhere. So many people died. There were no sirens. I'm coming to the hub to get water. But also, we have no money now because I can't work because of the fire.

Evangeline described the devastation she and her family experienced the day of the fire.

She said, "All the houses were gone, my sister, all my sisters' house, they have their own houses, all burn. My brother in law has 2 houses all burned on the same street...We did not want to go out because we did not expect the fire to reach us over there."



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