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The Untold Stories of Self-Employed Immigrant Latina Housekeepers During the 2025 Palisades Fire

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Introduction

According to the California Franchise Tax Board, self-employment refers to working for oneself instead of an employer. This employment model differs from traditional jobs, where individuals receive direct compensation from clients or customers. Self-employed individuals can focus their efforts on one or several clients and have the option to establish a legal business entity, although it is not a requirement. Importantly, licensure is only necessary if mandated by their specific occupation.

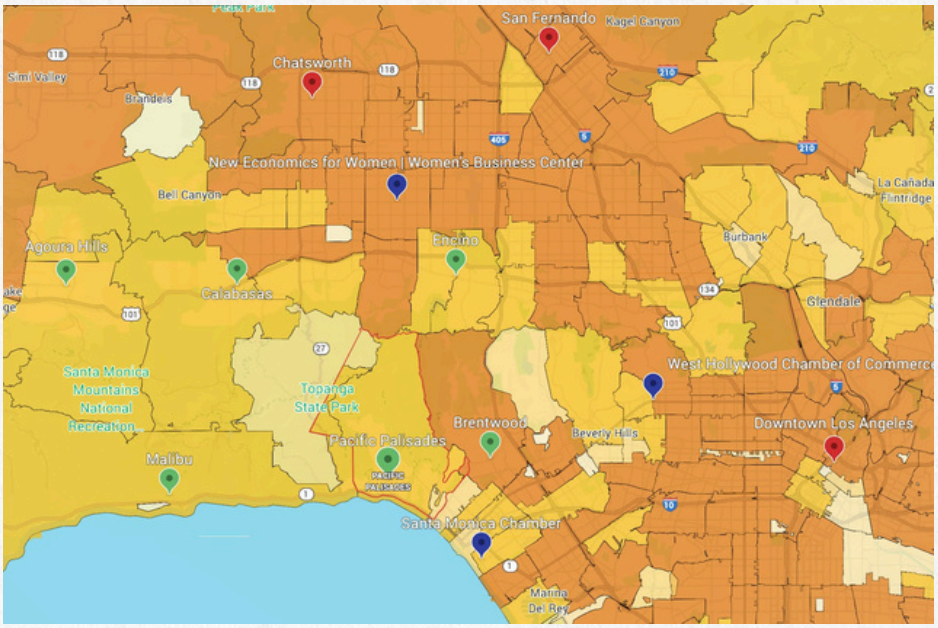
Housekeeping is a common field for many foreign-born Latinas, particularly women, seeking economic stability. However, this work often entails physically demanding tasks, long hours, and potential long-term health issues. Research indicates a strong correlation between traditional labor market challenges and the rise of self-employment among foreign-born Latinos (Robles and Cordero-Guzman 9). Many of these positions involve extensive working hours and a greater risk of on-the-job injuries, especially for foreign-born women who are either self-employed or work in family enterprises. Notably, they work an average of two and a half hours more than U.S.-born women, a significant increase that adds to their burden in pursuit of economic security. This extended time commitment often adversely affects their health, as evidenced by reports of poorer overall well-being (Bae 478-486). In Los Angeles, many housekeepers are self-employed Mexican immigrants. A prevalent stereotype positions them as "the best cleaning workers" (translated from Spanish to English), leading to a lack of formal interviews from clients (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al. 812). Unfortunately, many of these domestic workers face poorer health outcomes, lower wages, and heightened financial insecurity, often due to a lack of proper documentation or professional training. Furthermore, our interviews were conducted before recent ICE raids and anti-immigration policies, adding layers of stress that have likely intensified for these individuals amidst ongoing economic hardships and climate disasters, such as wildfires.

On January 7, 2025, a fire ignited near the Pacific Palisades neighborhood in Los Angeles, eventually ending its containment on January 31, 2025. The blaze consumed 23,448 acres, but its cause remains under investigation. Wealthy neighborhoods often depend on domestic labor and are situated in areas vulnerable to wildfires. The Pacific Palisades exemplifies this, attracting domestic workers to cater to affluent households (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al. 807). The fire's impact further exacerbates economic vulnerability for Latina immigrant housekeepers, whose livelihoods can be jeopardized if their clients' homes are destroyed, leaving them without income during recovery.

Emergency services were mobilized in response to the Palisades Fire, with approximately 8,500 firefighters, 50 aircraft, and 20 helicopters deployed to control the situation (Winter Journal 48). The California government also issued a substantial $2.5 billion aid package, allocating $1 billion for operational expenses and $500 million for temporary shelters (Winter Journal 49). Despite such efforts, many undocumented and self-employed individuals, including domestic workers, faced gaps in relief, as they often did not qualify for formal assistance. Community organizations offered vital support, including emergency supplies and housing referrals.

Media coverage predominantly focused on the environmental implications and government responses to the fires, which comprised 70% of the reporting (Winter Journal 45). In contrast, the effects on marginalized labor sectors, including immigrant domestic workers, received minimal attention. While public awareness regarding fire risks increased significantly—rising from 50% to 80%—along with support for government measures reaching 85%, the specific vulnerabilities faced by self-employed Latina housekeepers remained largely unacknowledged (Winter Journal 46).

Mapping the Impact

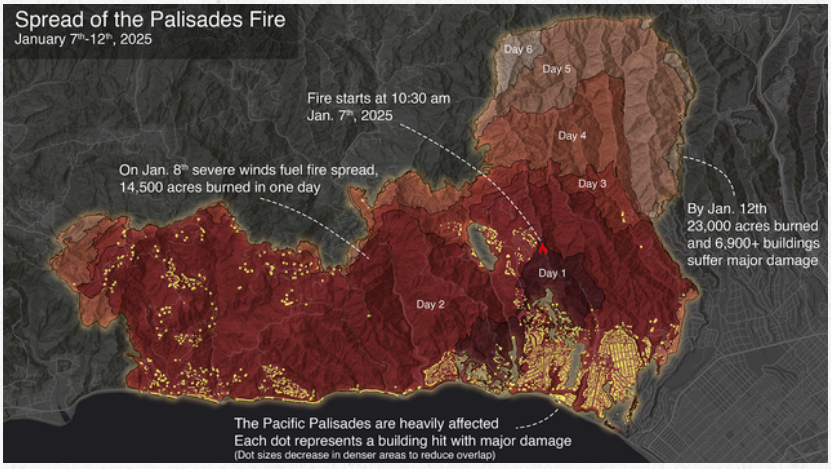


Legend:

- **Red pins:** neighborhoods where participants live
- **Green pins:** neighborhoods where participants work were affected by the Palisades Fire
- **Blue pins:** California Office Small Business Advocate's business center locations

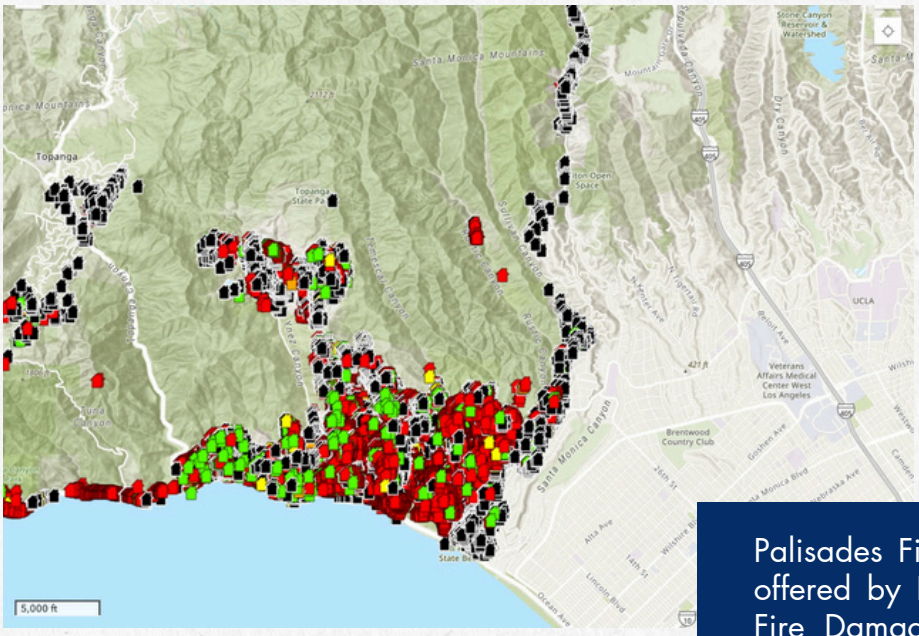
The map above demonstrates the locations where our participants live, the places where they work, and state business centers. An overlay of yellow to orange shades darkens with the number of populations in the neighborhood.

The red pins demonstrates the commute of the participants' distance to the location of the clients' home and their distance to their closets business assistance center, albeit, not all centers can support them with their specific issue (e.g. Womens Business Center support the disaster loans distributed by the federal government, which does not apply to undoumented or US noncitizen business owners).



The image on the left represents the spread of the Palisades Fire between January 7th and 12th. It demonstrates the extent to which the fires spread during that week, and each dot represents a building with significant damage caused by the fire, affecting a densely populated neighborhood. The image also demonstrates the extent of the impact it had on neighboring communities, primarily due to heavy winds carrying smoke across the city, which in turn impacted air quality in the Pacific Palisades and surrounding neighborhoods. While the map shows dots of buildings with significant damage, it does not account for lost labor hours. Data is captured by Cal Fire and presented by NASA's Scientific Visualization Studio.

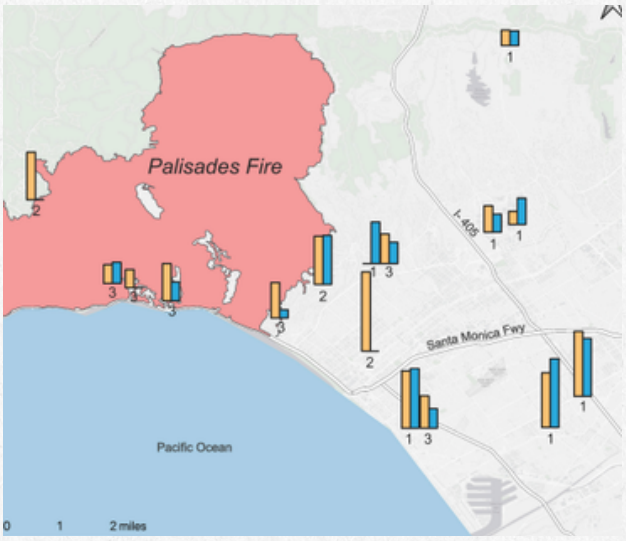
Mapping the Impact



Damaged or Destroyed Structures

- Destroyed (>50%)
- Major (26-50%)
- Minor (10-25%)
- Affected (1-9%)
- Inaccessible
- No Damage

Palisades Fire Damage Inspection Status map offered by LA County Recovers using the Cal Fire Damage Inspection database. The map illustrates the extensive physical damage caused by the Palisades Fire.



BTEX concentration (ppb)

2 ppb

1 ppb

0 ppb

- Indoor BTEX
- Outdoor BTEX
- Fire perimeter
- 1 Active burning (Jan 8–15, 2025)
- 2 Smoldering (Jan 24–31, 2025)
- 3 Off-gassing (Feb 11-18, 2025)

LA Fire Health composed a data brief on volatile organic compounds (VOCs) gases and vapors released from solids into indoor and outdoor air before, during, and after the Palisades Fire. The data demonstrates that outside VOC levels increased during the fire but remain below California and US Environmental Protection Agency exposure limits. However, indoor VOC levels during and after the fires were at their highest from smoke-impacted soft materials (e.g., furniture) that absorbed the smoke during the fire. The data explains how the fires can be unsafe for the public health of those living and working in domestic jobs, jeopardizing their health even after a fire and the release of chemicals like VOC, which can pose health risks, including respiratory irritation.

*BTEX is a VOC with four carcinogenic compounds (benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and xylenes).

Their Words, Their Stories

Marie

A Latina immigrant, she migrated to the U.S. at age 20 and has worked as a housekeeper for over 26 years. Undocumented and self-employed, she was introduced to domestic cleaning through her brother and eventually built a strong network of clients across Encino, Oak Park, Malibu, and the Pacific Palisades. At her busiest, she managed up to 12 clients, but since the 2025 Palisades Fire, her weekly workload has dropped to four days.

On the day of the fire, Marie was scheduled to clean a home she had worked at twice a week for six years. "*I was supposed to work at a house twice a week for 6 years . . . now I do not have a job*," she shared. That same week, she lost another long-term Saturday client. "*Some days I do not have work…The fire came [close] through Encino, and they had to evacuate for a couple of weeks*."

The financial loss has been steep and ongoing. "*I had a full week [of work], but now I only have four days. I am trying to find more clients, but it is better if somebody recommends you*." While Marie continues to navigate this instability with determination, the emotional toll of being left behind weighs heavily. "*Nobody thinks about us . . . they do not consider us (domestic workers)*," she reflected, her voice carrying the weight of her struggle.

Fatima

An Indigenous Latina immigrant, she migrated to the U.S. at age 22 and has worked as a housekeeper for 10 years. Undocumented and self-employed, she was a babysitter before becoming a housekeeper. Eventually, as the children she cared for grew up and went through a lengthy process to obtain her Permanent Residence status, her cousin introduced her to a client, where she later built a strong network of clientele across Brentwood and Beverly Hills.

During the Palisades Fire, Fatima was asked to show up at her clients' homes to clean, take public transportation, and commute 12 miles daily from Downtown LA. She felt the effects of the fires on her body. Despite these challenges, she was grateful to still have her job, stating, "*I said thank you to God, it (the fire) did not get all the way there (her clients' homes). And I was also sad for the losses of others whose homes were burnt and the people who were left without a job*."

Their Words, Their Stories

Amelia

An Indigenous Latina immigrant, she migrated to the U.S. at a young age and became a naturalized U.S. Citizen soon after. Her first job in the country was as a housekeeper for one family. After years of working with them, she was recommended to her client's friends and eventually grew a network of clientele across Agora Hills and Calabasas. Since then, she has been working with each of her clients for about 45 years, forming deep emotional bonds with them.

Amelia's clients were ordered to evacuate their homes for two weeks during the Palisades Fire. As a result of missing days of work, she lost over $1,500 in those two weeks, a significant financial blow. While she lives in Downtown LA and takes public transportation to her clients' homes, a 22-mile trip to Calabasas and a 30-mile trip to Agoura Hills, she explains her worries during the fires, "*I was scared my clients were going to lose their homes. After working with them for years, they have become another family to me and their home. I was more terrified of them losing their house than losing my job.*"

Oceana

Migrating to the U.S. at a young age after her mom won the Green Card Lottery, she pursued various careers. After her second child turned six, she states, "*I started working as a housekeeper because my mom said they make better money.*" She began with four clients and later began looking for a sole client with whom she could work daily. Since then, she has been working with her client for 21 years. Traveling from the San Fernando neighborhood to the Pacific Palisades, she begins to feel nostalgic, "*As I walk by the roads, I remember where I used to walk with him (client's dog) and I will no longer see the dogs running around nor my (housekeeper) friends, whose clients moved somewhere else or who lost their job.*" Thankfully, the fires did not strike her client's home, and she was compensated for the days she missed work. Currently, she is cleaning her client's rented home in Brentwood and goes back to the Palisades house to water the plants, collect the mail, and occasionally clean. Oceana grieves and relives her experience, "*When I first came back here, I was crying, crying. I am still sad. It is crazy how instant one's life changes*," reflecting on her life and the lives of those around her.

Experiential Themes: What the Data Reveals

While the impact of the Palisades Fire may seem straightforward, the stories of the interviewed participants revealed unique challenges that self-employed housekeeping businesses face. These nuanced realities—often overlooked due to limited media coverage—highlight the specific support these workers need. Unfortunately, due to a lack of outreach and understanding from federal, state, and local governments, financial assistance and post-fire working conditions fall short of what these business owners require.

The Palisades' location in a wildfire-prone zone exposes deeper systemic issues of economic vulnerability for Latina immigrant housekeepers. Already experiencing instability, these workers risk losing their income when clients' homes are destroyed or uninhabitable. This reveals an urgent need for policy reforms that prioritize their financial and occupational security.

While a few homes in and around the Palisades survived the fires, the surrounding conditions made them unsafe to live and work in. Housekeepers reported that homes remained hazardous to clean even after containment due to ash, lead, and toxic substances in the air and soil. Some clients asked them to help with post-fire cleanups, unaware—or dismissive—of the public health risks. These health concerns are especially pressing for immigrant laborers, who often bear the brunt of informal reconstruction efforts.

Lack of Media Coverage

Despite the prevalence of self-employed Latina housekeepers in the Palisades and surrounding neighborhoods, their job losses—whether permanent or temporary—have gone largely unreported. Most media coverage has focused on celebrities and homeowners, while the experiences of domestic workers have been ignored. These untold stories represent a broader erasure of immigrant laborers during and after climate disasters. Greater visibility of Latina-owned small businesses is essential, especially since legal status and language barriers often prevent them from accessing public and nonprofit assistance. Following disasters like the Palisades Fire, financial support must include these women to ensure more equitable aid distribution.

Each participant we interviewed expressed how frequently their experiences are overlooked in conversations about economic relief. Marie stated, "*Nobody thinks about us. They think about 'poor people,' but they do not consider us. Some people have good work, and others depend on it to feed their families . . . but sometimes they do not see it*," capturing the frustration felt by housekeepers who received no social or economic acknowledgment during or after the fire. With mainstream media failing to report their challenges, public and governmental understanding remains limited. The financial insecurity of domestic workers—especially those who are undocumented and reliant on clients living in wildfire-prone areas—remains invisible. As a result, income loss from missed workdays or permanent client displacement goes unrecognized.

Evacuation Zones	Latino Residents	Percent of Total Population	Jobs Held by Latinos	Percent of Total Jobs
Eaton Fire	57,936	27%	19,601	35%
Palisades Fire	4,997	7%	10,015	34%
Hurst Fire	11,352	33%	5,470	47%
All Evacuation Zones	74,285	23%	35,086	36%

The table above was created by UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute as a data brief of Latino representation among residents and jobs in fire evacuation zones. The table shows how vital Latinx laborers are to the local workforce, especially in the Palisades Fire zone.

Experiential Themes: What the Data Reveals

Economic Nuances

Most of our participants had little to no knowledge of financial relief opportunities. Even when they did, applying was complicated, and many domestic workers were ineligible. Amelia was the only one who heard of state assistance, as she stated, "*They said something about financial relief for all businesses, but they did not mean all businesses. I only heard them talk about it three times (on the radio).*" She and Fatima only knew about nonprofit relief efforts through word of mouth. They learned of CIELO, an Indigenous women-led organization that supported impacted families, but neither applied, believing their losses were minor compared to others. Meanwhile, Marie and Oceana had not heard of any relief programs.

Beyond awareness, multiple barriers blocked access: unreliable internet, distant relief centers in wealthier areas, and complicated eligibility tied to legal status, property ownership, or English proficiency. Figure 1 illustrates that aid locations were concentrated near the fire zone but sparse in working-class areas like the San Fernando Valley and Downtown LA, where most pink-collar workers reside. These logistical challenges made it even harder for immigrant-owned housekeeping businesses to get support.

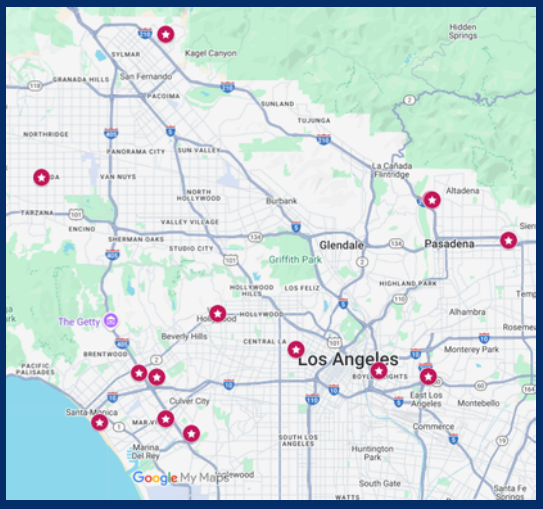


Figure 1: Business Recovery Centers across LA County

Updated on March 4, 2025, provided by Outsmart Disaster, Preparation for Small Business under the initiative of the California Office of the Small Business Advocate (CalOSBA).

Most of these centers are located in LA's basin. They are much more concentrated in Santa Monica and Hollywood, which are in wealthier regions, while only two are in the San Fernando Valley, despite its large population of low-income, immigrant laborers.

As stated on the website, each location offers basic services for homeowners and business owners; however, each center supports different issues, such as disaster recovery, business recovery, disaster loans, and small business development, which only makes it much more time-consuming to travel across Los Angeles to seek a center that better suits business needs.

Workplace Health Concerns

Domestic laborers often assist with post-wildfire cleanup, exposing them to toxic materials. CalMatters reports that workers cleaning after the fire experienced throat and skin irritation (Kuang & Reyes-Velarde, 2025). These jobs, though essential, are informal and loosely regulated, placing immigrant housekeepers at high risk, especially when not provided with protective equipment.

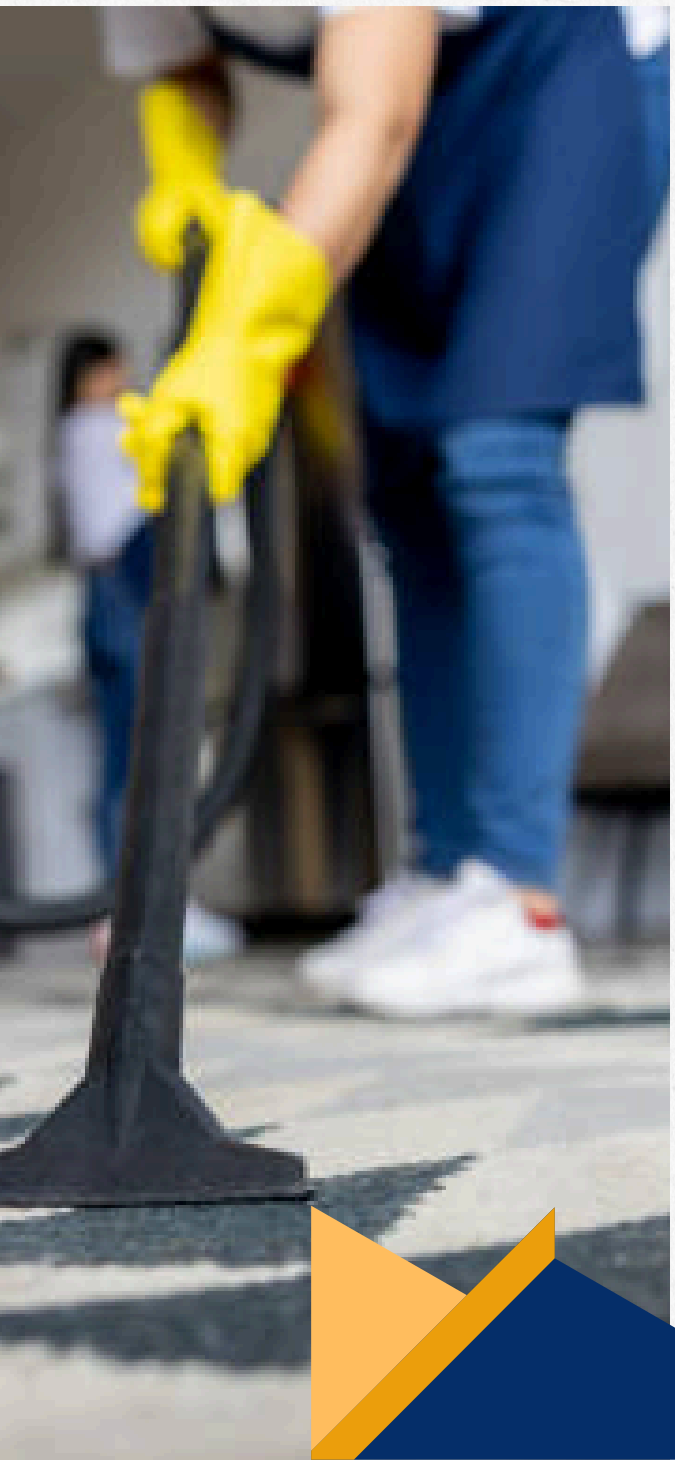
Fatima, for instance, was asked to clean her clients' Brentwood homes during the fires. With buses not running their full routes, she walked to work and described how "*It irritated my eyes and throat…it would hurt me for three hours*," even while wearing a mask. Her pay remained unchanged.

Oceana's clients paid her during the fire, but she was only invited back to clean after professional crews had arrived. Despite that delay, she still suffers health effects months later, "*My boss gave me a mask and has multiple air purifiers… You could not see (the ash), but if you grazed your hand across the walls, you could see it.*" Even Marie and Amelia, who stayed away from work at the height of the fires, now travel to affected zones and risk inhaling lingering toxins in the air and soil.

Beyond cleanup, rains following the fires led to groundwater contamination, according to the LA County Department of Public Health (Kan-Rice, 2025). This raises bigger concerns: how can the state protect domestic workers from post-wildfire pollutants while ensuring they are not forced to risk their health to earn a living?

Conclusion

Our research reveals how the 2025 Palisades Fire showed the vulnerabilities faced by self-employed immigrant Latina domestic workers in Los Angeles. We analyzed interviews, identifying overlapping themes of unsafe working conditions, financial instability, and systemic exclusion from resources and representation. Many housekeepers continued to clean in hazardous after-fire environments without the proper protection as they lacked economic alternatives and/or had immigration-related constraints. Despite their hard and essential work, they are overlooked in the media, policy responses, and public health outreach.



These recommendations, if implemented, have the potential to improve the lives and safety of immigrant domestic workers significantly.

1. **Expand emergency financial relief** to include self-employed immigrant workers.
2. **Reform disaster aid systems** by improving language access, simplifying documentation, and collaborating with trusted community-based organizations.
3. **Distribute** Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits, offer multilingual safety workshops, and regulate post-disaster employment conditions to prioritize worker health and safety.
4. **Increase media coverage** that centers immigrant domestic workers to amplify their voices and increase public and policymaker accountability.

As wildfires intensify with climate change, the failure to protect vulnerable working pop ulations is no longer a matter of oversight; it is a pressing crisis. The Palisades Fire revealed the invisible burden these workers endure, risking their health and livelihoods to be able to live. Without urgent intervention, future natural disasters will continue to deepen existing inequities.

Local and state governments, media outlets, and public health systems must act now. Your support and action are crucial to ensuring that immigrant domestic workers are seen, supported, and safeguarded, not just after disasters but before the next one begins.

Recommendations

Our research showcases the critical need for targeted, culturally and linguistically appropriate strategies to uplift and protect immigrant Latina domestic workers, particularly in the aftermath of disasters like the 2025 Palisades Fire. We present the following four actionable recommendations, which can only be effective if local and state policymakers, labor advocacy and workers' rights organizations, and media outlets work together. These strategies are designed to ensure the visibility, safety, and long-term support of a workforce often overlooked in formal relief and recognition efforts and require a united effort from all stakeholders.

Increase Accessibility and Availability of Resources for Immigrant Domestic Workers

Many immigrant Latinas enter self-employed housekeeping work as a pathway to build economic mobility, often viewing it as an opportunity to grow their business. However, barriers such as racial discrimination in accessing bank loans and a lack of targeted government support continue to undermine their financial stability (Santellano, 2021). Local and state governments should create grant and microloan programs for undocumented and immigrant-owned small businesses, particularly those in informal sectors like housekeeping. Nonprofits can co-host application clinics and financial literacy workshops to facilitate inclusive access. These programs must offer multilingual support, be low-barrier, and flexible enough to accommodate varying legal and employment statuses. Additionally, government agencies and nonprofit partners should expand financial literacy workshops and offer mobile support units in neighborhoods with high immigrant populations.

Increase Media Coverage to Elevate Immigrant Domestic Workers' Stories

Our interviews emphasize the invisibility of undocumented and self-employed Latina domestic workers in post-disaster narratives, even when they continue serving clients in wildfire-affected areas and endure both health and income losses. Their labor and lived experiences, though essential, remain invisible. This erasure compounds their marginalization and reduces public awareness of their needs.

A study by Mendez, Flores-Haro, and Zucker (2020) highlights how undocumented Latino/a and Indigenous immigrants, especially domestic workers, are disproportionately impacted by disasters yet are almost absent from media and official recovery narratives. Their study emphasizes the critical need for inclusive, culturally and linguistically accessible media representation to address structural invisibility and inform equitable disaster planning.

To address this, media outlets should actively collaborate with ethnic media, and local journalists should collaborate with advocacy groups to gain access to trusted sources and to ethically report on these issues. In addition, media outlets should partner with worker and community organizations to amplify domestic workers' firsthand stories, emphasizing dignity and essential labor during climate emergencies. Journalism training programs and fellowships can empower immigrant storytellers to share their experiences ethically and authentically.

Recommendations

Enhance Outreach Strategies to Reach Vulnerable Populations Effectively

Our interviews revealed that many domestic workers were unaware of available resources during and after the wildfire, not because aid did not exist, but because they did not know these resources existed. Government agencies and community organizations should invest in peer-led outreach programs to bridge this gap. Peer-led outreach models like Promotoras have demonstrated strong effectiveness in Latino immigrant communities, increasing trust and improving access to essential services. For example, Balcázar et al. (2011) explain how promotoras strengthen the connection between underserved Latino communities and essential health and social services, highlighting how essential peer-led outreach is. Therefore, government agencies and community organizations should train trusted domestic workers to disseminate timely information about natural disaster updates, resources, labor rights, and health protections in culturally familiar spaces.

Furthermore, with today's political climate, immigrant communities often avoid seeking services due to fear of immigration enforcement or not fully understanding their eligibility, even when resources are available for them. These barriers showcase the critical need for accessible, peer-led outreach built on trust and clarity. Training domestic workers as outreach ambassadors, paired with messaging on platforms like WhatsApp, the radio, and social media, can ensure that essential information reaches those most vulnerable, especially those with limited English fluency or digital access.

Prioritize Health and Safety in Working Conditions Post-Disaster

The aftermath of natural disasters, such as the Palisades Fire, places domestic workers in hazardous environments without proper safety protections or equipment. Two interviewees shared that they were expected to return to their clients' homes to clean despite suffering from respiratory symptoms, eye irritation, and exhaustion, and without receiving any proper training or protective gear. Employers often failed to conduct safety checks or provide adequate equipment. Due to income insecurity and immigration status, workers often felt they had no choice but to accept these dangerous conditions, as alternative sources of income were inaccessible.

Research shows that workers in informal or unregulated jobs, such as many domestic workers, face heightened risks of environmental health harm and often lack access to medical care or workplace protections (Theodore, Nik et al, 2018). To combat these statistics, public health organizations work alongside labor advocacy groups to host mobile health screenings and information sessions in neighborhoods with large populations of domestic workers. These efforts must be proactive and preventive, not just occurring as reactive responses during emergencies. Therefore, community clinics must be adequately resourced to offer low-cost respiratory health screenings tailored to undocumented workers and others in informal employment. These structural vulnerabilities are magnified during disasters, making urgent policy intervention essential.

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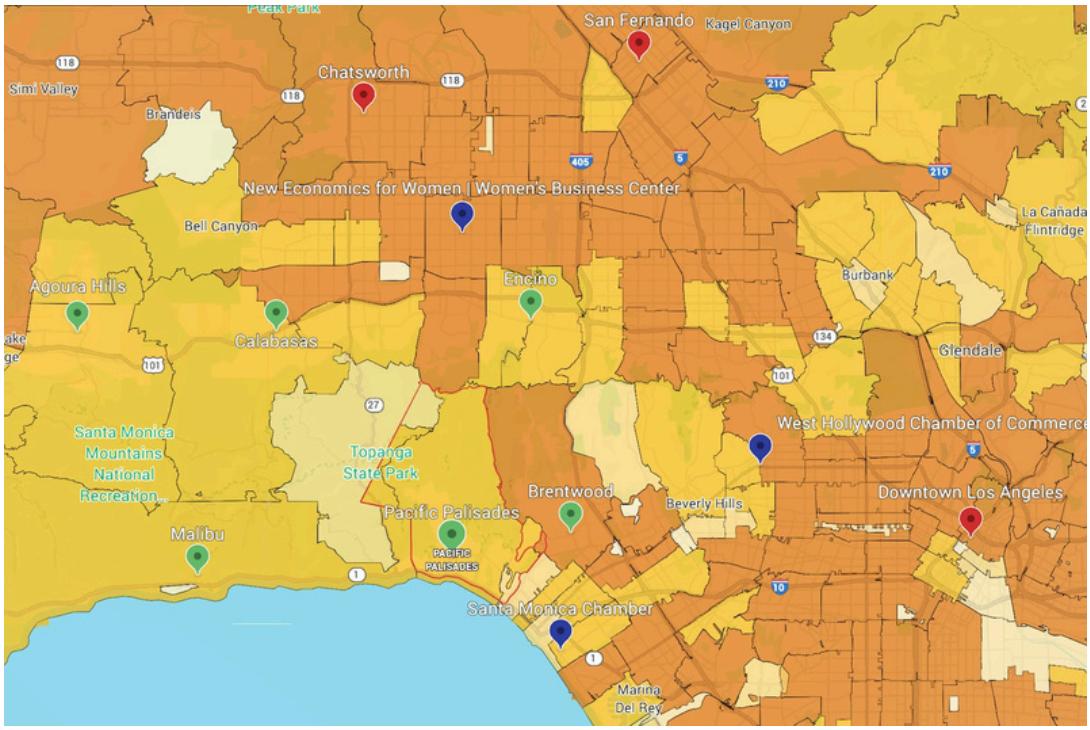
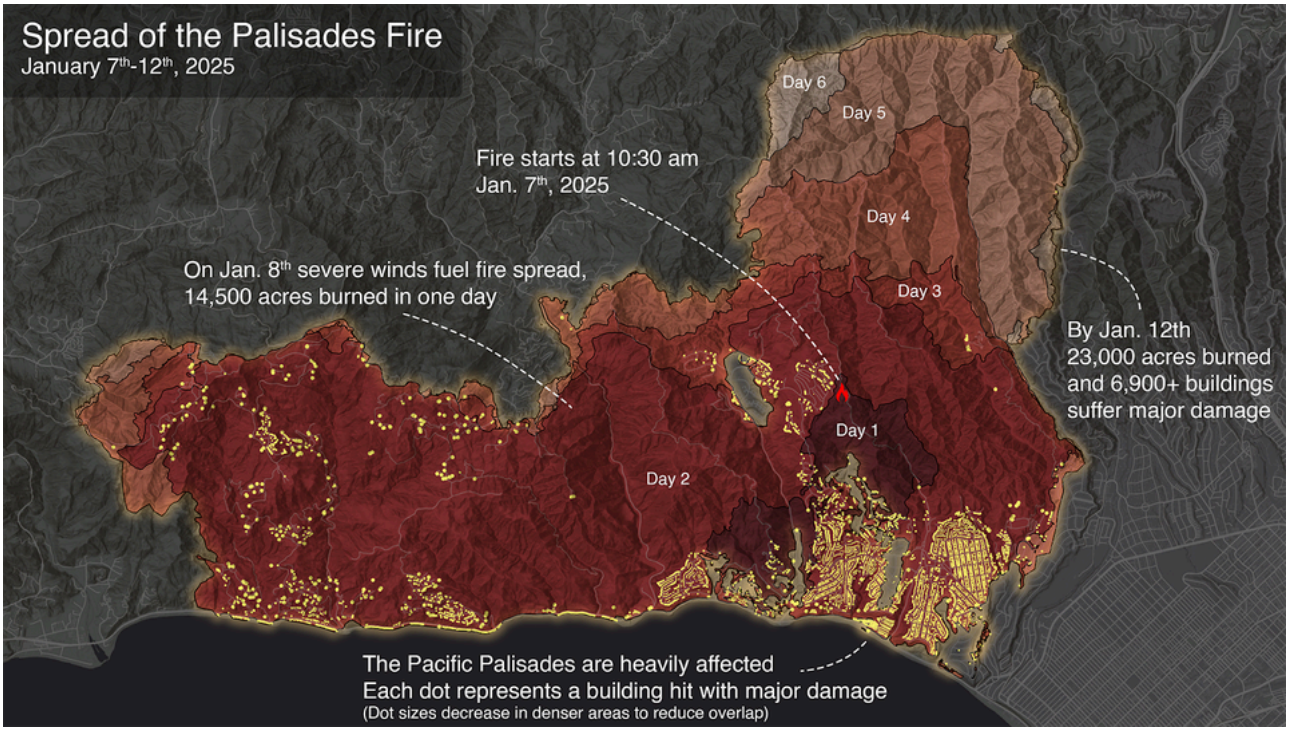
Data Visualizations Enlarged



Evacuation Zones	Latino Residents	Percent of Total Population	Jobs Held by Latinos	Percent of Total Jobs
Eaton Fire	57,936	27%	19,601	35%
Palisades Fire	4,997	7%	10,015	34%
Hurst Fire	11,352	33%	5,470	47%
All Evacuation Zones	74,285	23%	35,086	36%



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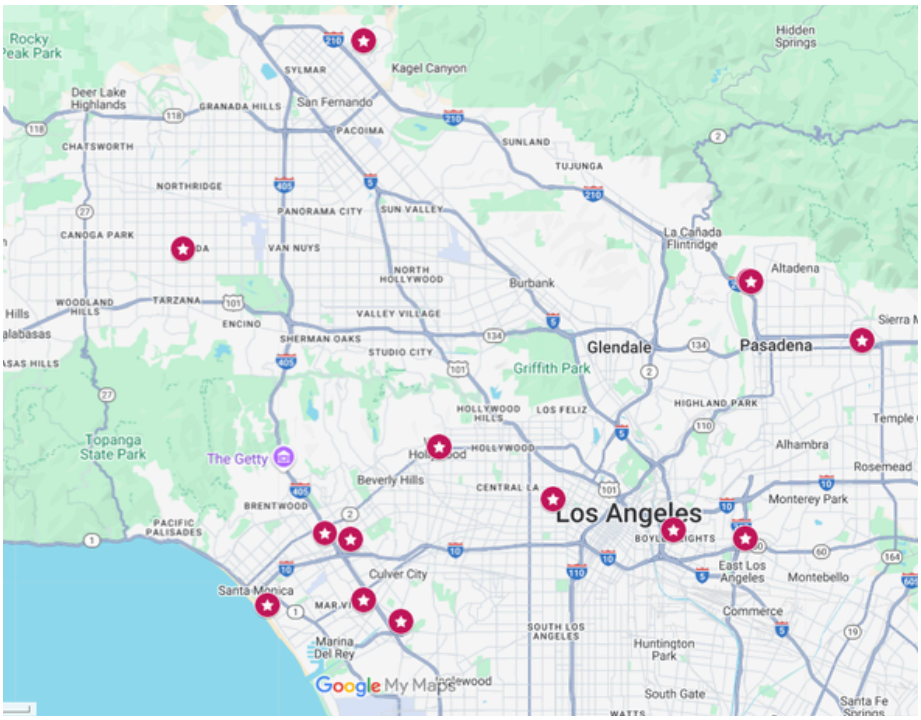
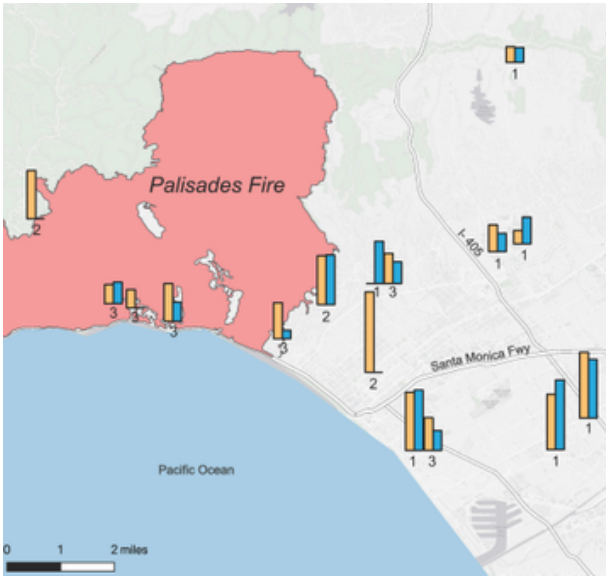
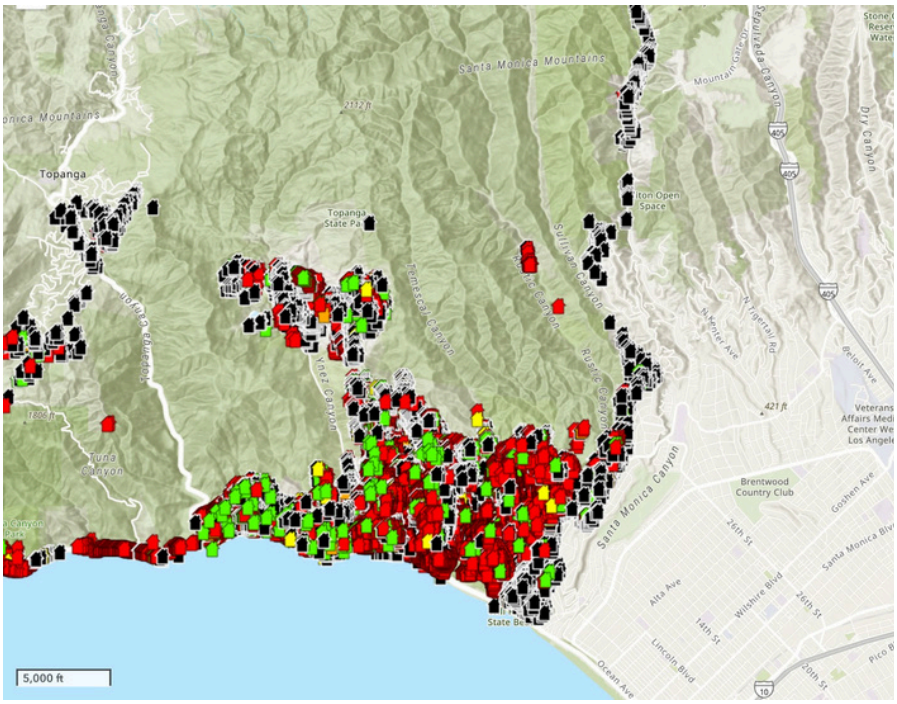


BTEX concentration (ppb)

- 2 ppb
- 1 ppb
- 0 ppb

- Indoor BTEX
- Outdoor BTEX
- Fire perimeter
- 1 Active burning (Jan 8–15, 2025)
- 2 Smoldering (Jan 24–31, 2025)
- 3 Off-gassing (Feb 11-18, 2025)





Legend

Damaged or Destroyed Structures

- Destroyed (>50%)
- Major (26-50%)
- Minor (10-25%)
- Affected (1-9%)
- Inaccessible
- No Damage