When Crisis Strikes: Protecting Records and Voting Rights Amid the 2025 Wildfires

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Introduction: Facing the Crisis

In January 2025, the Eaton Canyon and Palisades wildfires swept through Los Angeles County with unprecedented speed and intensity. In the span of days, more than 37,000 acres were scorched, over 16,000 structures destroyed, and tens of thousands of residents displaced. These fires not only reshaped the physical landscape of the county but also tested the resilience of government institutions tasked with serving residents during times of crisis.

California is no stranger to environmental threats. Wildfires, earthquakes, mudslides, and flash floods are recurrent realities that pose risks not only to lives and property but also to democratic processes and civic infrastructure. For those of us charged with administering elections and safeguarding vital and property records, the crisis raised an urgent question: *how do we protect both the records and the rights that anchor people to their communities when everything else is lost?* This reflection shares what we experienced, what we learned, and how those lessons might guide practitioners facing similar emergencies elsewhere.

Impact on Communities and Election Administration

The wildfires displaced tens of thousands of residents, many of whom lost their homes—and with their homes critical personal records that represent milestones in their lives. Vital documents like birth, death, and marriage certificates were often among the belongings destroyed, compounding the challenges families faced as they sought shelter and began the process of recovery. At the height of the disaster, more than 88,000 individuals were under evacuation orders, and nearly 75,000 were under evacuation warnings.

For our office, serving as the county's administrator of elections and custodian of vital and property records, the wildfires presented three pressing challenges:

- **disruption of civic services**—displaced residents required immediate replacement of vital documents such as birth, death, and marriage certificates as well as property records to secure housing, medical care, and insurance claims;

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- **potential interruptions to election operations**—while no election was underway at the time of the fires, the incident underscored the risks such disasters pose for voter registration, ballot distribution, and access to vote centers; and
- **maintenance of public trust and information flow**—during widespread displacement and uncertainty, the public needed assurance that core public and democratic services would remain intact.

These dual realities—emergency response and democratic continuity—framed the county's work in the weeks and months following the disaster.

Emergency Protocols and Continuity of Service

Vital Records

When the governor proclaimed an emergency, state protocols were triggered, allowing residents affected by the fires to obtain replacement vital records free of charge. The California Department of Public Health quickly circulated an all-county letter outlining the procedures and providing the standardized affidavit required for requests. This framework enabled county offices to:

- waive replacement fees for impacted residents,
- extend flexibility for delayed certificate filings,
- adapt processing to remote and mobile settings, and
- maintain services during periods of countywide or statewide closures.

Real Estate Records

Parallel to the state's guidance on vital records, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors issued an emergency order waiving fees for replacement real estate records. To support impacted residents, we created a streamlined request form that simplified the process, ensuring essential information was collected while easing the burden on those navigating recovery.

The digital recording system—an investment made in prior years—proved critical to resilience. It allowed for remote access and continued processing for title companies, legal entities, and residents navigating property-related claims. Even in the event of physical displacement, the digital recording infrastructure ensured uninterrupted service.

Crisis in an Election Context

Although the wildfires struck outside of an election cycle, the situation highlighted how environmental crises intersect with democratic processes. California has a history of adapting election laws during emergencies. In 2009, for example,

executive orders permitted flexibility for first responders deployed during wildfire response, enabling them to cast ballots from incident command centers. Cross-county collaboration ensured that emergency personnel temporarily stationed away from home could still participate in elections.

That history makes clear why Los Angeles County's adoption of the California Voter's Choice Act (VCA) model in 2020 was so important. At its core, the VCA reflects the need and desire to give voters multiple days and multiple ways to vote. In ordinary times, these options have steadily improved the voting experience by providing convenience, accessibility, and choice. But just as critical, they also serve as a built-in failsafe in moments of crisis. By offering up to ten days of in-person voting at vote centers along with mailing a ballot to all registered voters and providing secure ballot drop boxes, the voting model reduces reliance on any single day or location—ensuring voters can still cast a ballot even when emergencies disrupt normal routines.

Central to our approach is the objective of meeting voters where they are and giving them flexible return options. Two programs extend this commitment: the Mobile Voting Program, which can be dispatched to shelters, temporary housing sites, or incident command posts to bring secure voting directly to displaced communities; and Remote Accessible Vote by Mail (RAVBM), which allows voters to access and mark their ballots on personal devices, then print and return them by mail, drop box, or at a vote center. Together, these programs ensure access, even in crisis scenarios, by adapting to the circumstances that voters face.

The 2025 wildfires, while not coinciding with an election, served as a reminder that such circumstances could arise at any time, and readiness is not hypothetical. Disasters will come, and election administrators must be prepared to keep democracy accessible in their wake.

Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs)

Within one week of the fires' outbreak, disaster recovery centers (DRCs) were opened in Altadena and West Los Angeles to provide direct services to displaced residents. Staff worked quickly to set up computers, routers, and printers so same-day replacement documents could be issued. Over the course of five months—until their closure on May 30, 2025—nearly 10,000 vital records and close to 5,000 real property copies were provided to displaced residents. These numbers matter, but what stays with us are the stories: a parent clutching a replacement birth certificate needed to enroll a child in school and a homeowner using property records to begin the long road to rebuilding. The DRCs offered more than services; they offered reassurance that residents had not been forgotten.

Setting up the DRCs also felt remarkably familiar to election work. Much like opening a vote center, staff had to configure technical equipment quickly, test connectivity, and make sure printers and routers were reliable under pressure. Just as important, DRCs were deliberately located in spaces that were public-facing, accessible, and trusted by the community—the same principles used when siting

and operating vote centers. In both cases, the success of the operation was measured not only by the functioning of the equipment but also by whether people felt welcome, informed, and able to complete the task that brought them there. It symbolized the accessibility and responsiveness of government at a time when residents most needed assurance.

Communications and Outreach

In any crisis, communication becomes as crucial as the service itself. The wildfires demonstrated that our ability to maintain public trust depended not only on delivering records and safeguarding elections but also on making sure people knew what was available to them and how to access it. Our outreach spanned both sides of our responsibilities—vital and property records on one hand and voter information on the other.

On the records side, the priority was letting displaced residents know that replacement copies could be obtained quickly and at no cost. We engaged local media at DRCs, created a dedicated landing page with frequently asked questions, and pushed updates across social media. Flyers distributed to community partners at shelters and hubs filled the gap for those without internet access. Across all channels, the guiding principle was clarity—achieved by explaining the process simply, avoiding bureaucratic language, and emphasizing accessibility.

For voters, the concern was different but just as urgent. Many feared displacement meant losing their right to vote in their home districts. Our response was direct and consistent: eligibility remains tied to a voter's residence even when a temporary mailing address is needed for ballot delivery. That reassurance was repeated through website updates, targeted email notifications, social media campaigns, multilingual flyers, and coverage in local media. The goal was to meet voters where they were and eliminate doubts that their voices still mattered.

Working in the background to track voter registration change activities in fire-affected areas beyond the immediate response period is key as well. Automated list maintenance activity triggered by address change notifications from the U.S. Postal Service may not distinguish between a temporary mailing address and a permanent address change. This can impact the ability of voters to receive the correct voter information and their ability to cast a ballot on contests and measures within the community in which they live or where they intend to rebuild.

Together, these strategies underscored a single principle: communication must be proactive, consistent, and accessible. Whether someone needed a replacement birth certificate or clarity about voting rights, the message was the same—you still have access; you still have a voice, and our office is here to support you.

Lessons Learned

The wildfire response of 2025 reinforced that continuity is not just a technical function. It is the foundation of trust in government. When residents walked away from a DRC with a replacement record or when displaced voters learned they could

still cast a ballot in their home districts, it sent a message that stability and belonging were intact despite the chaos around them. The lessons we carry forward are as follows.

1. **Pre-planning and interagency coordination** make rapid response possible. Relationships with state and local partners should be cultivated before disaster strikes.
2. **Flexibility in service delivery and staffing** is as essential in elections as it is in records. The ability to stand up a DRC in days echoes the same capacity required to prepare vote centers under pressure.
3. **Clear voter communications** are as critical as replacing lost records. Proactively addressing concerns about eligibility and displacement is crucial to protecting confidence.
4. **Election models designed with options**—such as multiple days of in-person voting at any location throughout the jurisdiction, varied and convenient options for returning vote-by-mail ballots, mobile voting, and RAVBM—are not only good policy but also practical fail-safes when communities are disrupted.
5. **Reliable service builds hope.** When people see government agencies show up and deliver in the middle of a crisis, it reminds them they still have sources of stability even when everything else feels uncertain.

Looking Forward

Looking ahead, our challenge is to ensure these responses become second nature, not improvisations. That means:

- **institutionalizing playbooks** so disaster responses—for both records and elections—are standardized and quickly activated;
- **strengthening statewide coordination** to ensure alignment across counties so displaced voters and residents encounter consistent practices;
- **investing in resilient systems and training**, including scenario planning for vote centers, mobile voting units, and RAVBM access during emergencies; and
- **embedding voter-centered communications** to make sure displaced residents never question whether they remain eligible to vote in their community.

The resilience L.A. County demonstrated in 2025 should not be viewed as extraordinary. It should be expected as a baseline of preparedness that defines how election administrators safeguard both access and confidence in every circumstance.

Conclusion

The Eaton Canyon and Palisades wildfires of 2025 left scars on Los Angeles County that will endure for years. For our office, the crisis tested whether we could preserve not only the documents that anchor identity and property but also the democratic access that gives our communities their voice.

The experience reminded us that election administration is not just about managing ballots and records. It is also about ensuring continuity, dignity, and trust. Disasters will continue to challenge us, but our responsibility is to ensure that the right to vote and the services that support it remain uninterrupted. In doing so, we affirm the resilience of not only our systems but also our democracy itself.