

Improve Disaster Communications & Alert Systems for a Safer, Equitable Response

"A validated report of fire in west Altadena (was reported) as early as 12:55am on Jan. 8. L.A. County Fire personnel reported that the fire appeared to be moving west across Lake Avenue at 2:18am. But evacuation orders in west Altadena weren't issued until 3:25am." **- McChrystal Group After-Action Report**

The January fires exposed serious failures in emergency communications and alarm systems, which directly contributed to delayed evacuations, and further increased the public's exposure to harm, and later limited fire-survivor access to recovery resources.

Virtually all of the fourteen post-fire reports cite the communications failure as a major concern. Installing a standalone system is not sufficient. The McChrystal Group Report exposed a lack of interdepartmental communications between Fire, Sheriff and Emergency Management Departments. Communication between fire emergency and emergency management departments is needed. Moreover, seamless communication and coordination is needed between the County and City, as well as with other cities that participate in mutual aid agreements. Altadena, one of the largest unincorporated cities in the US, exemplifies the impact of disjointed disaster communications and an urgent need for redesigning systems and approach.

Protocol Gap: A Systemic Barrier

The Palisades and Eaton fires revealed a dangerous "Protocol Gap" and the critical absence of a unified, cross-jurisdictional process for issuing public alerts. This dysfunction persists because entrenched bureaucracies (City, County, State OES) and vendors defensively protect their autonomy and proprietary systems, creating widespread resistance to mandated coordination. The key barriers are the lack of a unified authorization framework and incompatible operational protocols between agencies. While this collective resistance prevents top-down change, no single entity

possesses enough influence to block an external, neutral initiative.

A plethora of communications and public alert services and products are currently being touted as the answer to the communications problem. Currently, the County and the City assert that they're already working on a new approach. Unfortunately, public trust in government is so low, a more transparent public process is needed.

Los Angeles City and County must implement a new integrated communications and alert system. Particularly in the Los Angeles context, the dynamic between City and County interoperable communications necessitates rethinking and integration of newer approaches from state and federal agencies. California's statewide trusted messenger network, led by the Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communications, may provide an avenue for streamlining improvements and institutionalizing integrated systems.

Recommended Action

Philanthropy can play a decisive role by funding a sophisticated advocacy approach to ensure an effective and integrated system is established across Los Angeles. There must be a well-informed outside force to compel the City and the County to implement new emergency response protocols and communication systems. Since such communications tools are managed by government entities, philanthropy can provide support to vet, test, validate, and ultimately recommend communication tools and technologies to adopt. Philanthropy funding can also support coordination across government agencies in the Early Warning System (EWS) and disaster communications ecosystem for comprehensive adoption.

Early warning systems are often socio-technological ones. In addition to the need for improved, integrated telecommunications, investment in the social infrastructure to provide "last-mile" communications to communities also proves foundational to success. Philanthropies can support trusted messenger networks of nonprofits and community based organizations to ensure culturally sensitive and thoughtful adoption across Los Angeles' diverse neighborhoods.

Expected Impact

Early warning systems reduce fatalities and injuries by enabling timely evacuations and protective actions. They can also allow people to better protect assets and critical infrastructure, reduce economic and physical damage by up to 30% with just 24 hours' notice. These systems also support preparedness, allowing communities and authorities to allocate resources and develop response plans effectively. An improved system would limit false alerts – which were sent out during and after the fires and a robust, multi-channel communication system can better meet people where they are, rather than requiring them to navigate numerous websites and unfamiliar platforms during a crisis.

Timeline

In September, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors tasked agencies to perform an internal review of the County's communication systems and protocols. Their "report-back" is due in early-2026. Mayor Bass has announced a similar process at the City.

Therefore, publicly launching an independent advocacy stance is urgently needed. Retired fire professionals must be part of the team, as should diverse communications experts and community organizers. Including representatives with differing approaches and view points to get widespread early buy-in will be essential. Due to the sophisticated nature of the problem and deep knowledge required, the staffing and consulting would be more expensive than a traditional advocacy effort. Trusted nonprofits like Climate Resolve, US Green Building Council or RAND Corporation could serve as the convenor and fiscal sponsor of this watchdog effort.

An effective and comprehensive effort will take time and should be deployed as close to the one year anniversary in January 2026 as possible to leverage redoubled attention to the issue.

Notional Budget

Estimated total budget for an 18-month advocacy effort: $1,000,000

- $360,000 for fire / communications consultations
- $180,000 for political, legal, and legislative consultations
- $270,000 for a local organization to lead community engagement and last mile adoption
- $100,000 for a public communications and public awareness campaign
- $90,000 for administrative support

Evidence from Reports

The communication challenge emerged repeatedly, with reports documenting specific failures and opportunities for improvement:

- ULI's "Rebuilding Los Angeles after the January 2025 Wildfires" report identified that inconsistent messaging across agencies led to delayed evacuations and increased risk exposure, while poor communication about available resources resulted in low utilization rates and inequitable access to support services during the recovery period.
- LA County Forward's "Blueprint for Rebuilding" report noted that County officials acknowledge that residents have consistently requested clarity on the path forward, yet many continue struggling to navigate the complex landscape of insurance requirements, financing options, construction planning, and permitting processes, challenges that prove especially daunting for households and small businesses rebuilding for the first time.
- The Blue Ribbon Commission on Climate Action and Fire-Safe Recovery documented that utility restoration timelines were poorly communicated, creating uncertainty and hampering business recovery, and emphasized the need for enhanced emergency response systems, including improved warning systems and inter-agency coordination.
- The LAEDC's report emphasizes the importance of coordinated governance, public education, and ongoing monitoring of fire conditions.

