

Jessica Rogers Oral Testimony

Pacific Palisades Fire - January 7, 2025 and ongoing

Good morning. My name is Jessica Rogers, and I serve as President of the Pacific Palisades Residents Association, a 58-year organization dedicated to protecting our environment and ensuring resident safety. I'm also a geriatric social worker who spent over a decade as the clinical social worker for our elderly population at the local synagogue. I am currently the Vice Chair of the Pacific Palisades Long Term Recovery Group. I'm here today to speak about the catastrophic failures that endangered our most vulnerable residents on January 7th, the ongoing abandonment we continue to experience, and why we need federal intervention to ensure our community can rebuild safely.

The Day of the Fire: A Warning System Failure

At 10:45 AM on January 7th, I saw billowing smoke north of El Medio Bluffs. Within 5 minutes, I knew something was terribly wrong. Within 10 minutes, the entire hillside was engulfed in flames.

Here is what should horrify this committee: **We never received an evacuation notice when the fire started.** As I ran through my house gathering belongings, I kept checking my phone for alerts from local government. Nothing came. It wasn't until 12:30 PM—nearly two hours after the fire started—that I received a notice to "prepare for potential evacuation." By that time, I was already filling up my car, feeling the heat on my skin like standing too close to a BBQ.

The mandatory evacuation notice? That didn't arrive until nearly 5:00 PM—when the homes on my street were already burned and smoke made it impossible to breathe.

Emergency Response: When Residents Had to Lead

As soon as I escaped around 1:15 PM, I immediately took charge because local government response was inadequate. I contacted our council woman's staff at the fire department's Central Command, relaying ground-level information from residents. I asked neighbors to knock on doors before evacuating. Most critically, I coordinated sending firefighters and police officers to locations where elderly people were left behind.

The Palisades Highlands situation was desperate. Residents were trapped because access points were blocked by abandoned vehicles. People had been engulfed in flames with no option but to abandon their cars in the middle of the street.

I made calls continuously through the night—so many that my tongue was bloodied on both sides from cuts from my teeth. I did this because our elderly residents—more than 25% of our total population—were in grave danger, and no one else was coordinating their rescue.

Let me be clear: seniors with mobility issues, those dependent on oxygen, residents with dementia who needed assistance—they all lost precious hours because of inadequate warnings. In my years as a geriatric social worker, I knew exactly who would struggle to evacuate quickly. I did everything I could to help coordinate their safety because the system failed.

Ten Months of Abandonment

What happened on January 7th was a disaster. What has happened since proves local government cannot handle our recovery.

We've been told the city has no funding to support us. We're still fighting for permit fee waivers, adequate security, and infrastructure funding. Every time we ask for help, we're told to "self-fund." We've been charged for repairs of fire hydrants damaged in the fire. The city continues to increase our taxes and raises our rates for water and power. Before the June deadline, I asked the mayor to add safety funding as a line item request to FEMA. She refused, insisting our community needed to fund our own security. That if we wanted permit fee waivers we would get about \$86M worth and any additional funding would have to come from us.

This pattern is clear: local government failed us on January 7th and continues to fail us. We've been forced to lead our own recovery because the city won't.

Our Request: A Federally-Funded, Resident-Led Recovery Authority

Based on my experience with local government on the day of the fire and since the fire, we need federal intervention.

The city and county abandoned us during the fire and continue to abandon us. Our elderly residents won't return without proper security, infrastructure, and emergency systems the city refuses to provide. When the emergency happened, residents led the response. We can lead our rebuilding, but we need direct federal funding. The mayor's refusal to request safety funding from FEMA proves that federal dollars filtered through the city won't reach us.

On January 7th, when official systems failed, residents led. We coordinated rescues, we knocked on doors, we saved lives. Ten months later, we're still leading because local government won't. Our elderly residents deserve to return home safely. They deserve emergency systems that work. They deserve a government that responds. Since local government cannot or will not provide this, we're asking the federal government to empower us to lead our own recovery. We know our community. We saved our neighbors. Now we're asking for the resources and authority to rebuild our homes. Thank you.