

FROM THE CHAIR

by Michael R. Diliberto

The words of Martin Luther King Jr.—“If you can’t fly then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.”—resonate at this time, as the New Year brought a major crisis to Los Angeles: a fire pandemic. Life in Los Angeles changed forever on January 7, 2025, when, around 10:20 A.M., a UC San Diego program to monitor wildfires and disasters in real time picked up smoke rising. This was the first sighting of the Palisades Fire. Approximately six minutes later, a plane spotter at Los Angeles International Airport captured the first plumes of smoke on its livestream.

By 11:00 A.M., the Palisades Fire size was upgraded from 10 to 200 acres, with no containment. Evacuation orders were issued, but people trying to evacuate and road closures on the Pacific Coast Highway made it difficult for residents to escape. By 2:30 P.M., Palisades Drive was filled with abandoned cars as firefighters battled flames engulfing structures near the road. By 3:00 P.M., evacuation shelters were placed around the city, and Governor Newsom declared a state of emergency in California. By evening, the Palisades Fire grew to 1,262 acres and two new fires—Eaton and Hurst—occurred nearby. Simultaneously, extremely high winds forced cancellation of the water dropping operation and grounded helicopters.

On January 8, the Palisades Fire size was upgraded to 11,802 acres, with two reported civilian fatalities. The Lidia Fire started about two hours later. Cal Fire reported the Sunset Fire in the Hollywood Hills started at 5:57 P.M., a fifth active wildfire. The Palisades Fire remained the largest, reaching 17,234 acres by end of day, with no containment.

By January 9, the Sunset Fire was fully contained, but the Kenneth Fire started to burn 50 acres in the West Hills. On January 10, the Palisades Fire grew to almost 20,000 acres with six percent containment and the Eaton Fire grew to almost 14,000 acres with no containment. Governor Newsom called

for an “independent investigation into the loss of water pressure to local fire hydrants and the reported unavailability of water supplies from the Santa Ynez Reservoir,” 117 million gallons of water near Pacific Palisades. Public utility officials stated demand for water during an unprecedented fire made it impossible to maintain any pressure to hydrants at high elevations.

By January 15, at least 25 deaths were reported, and more than a dozen other people were missing. Four fires remained active, with the Palisades Fire covering more than 23,000 acres and 19 percent contained.* The Palisades and Eaton fires together may possibly be the worst natural disaster in U.S. history by cost. What about human cost in terms of pain, suffering, and unimaginable loss? We all have friends and colleagues who lost their entire homes and businesses to this wildfire, fueled by ferocious hurricane force Santa Ana winds.

I am proud to see local bar associations step up to help people navigate the complicated process of rebuilding their lives. The LACBA website contains a library of legal resources and emergency services related to the fires. (See page seven herein.) Law firms are offering free services to pursue claims against any business accused of taking advantage of this disaster by price gouging, and are raising money for disaster assistance. We will get through this together. ■

*Timeline: How the deadly California wildfires unfolded, ABC News, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5c7GGa_nY0 (last accessed Feb. 10, 2025).

Michael R. Diliberto, a mediator and arbitrator with Diliberto ADR, is the 2024-2025 chair of the Los Angeles Lawyer Editorial Board. He also served two terms as chair of the Los Angeles County Bar Association's Alternative Dispute Resolution Section.