NATURAL HAZARDS CENTER
University of Colorado Boulder

RESEARCH BRIEF SERIES
QUICK RESPONSE

AWARD RECIPIENTS

SHIRLEY FELDMANN-JENSEN
California State University, Long Beach

SARA O'CONNOR
California State University, Long Beach

STEVE J. JENSEN
California State University, Long Beach

BRENT WOODWORTH
Los Angeles Emergency Preparedness Foundation

AWARD AMOUNT:
$12,000

This research brief is part of an award program designed to support the collectection of perishable data following disasters and other extreme events to promote social science innovation in hazards and disaster research. This program fosters new knowledge and perspectives by prioritizing research that fills gaps in the literature and is unlikely to be funded rapidly by other means.

TRIAL BY FIRE : THE COMMUNITY BRIGADES PILOT PROGRAM

OVERVIEW

The December 2024 Franklin Fire and January 2025 Palisades Fire in Malibu, California offered an opportunity to explore the implementation and successes of the Community Brigade pilot program—a volunteer training initiative focused on fostering community-led wildfire resilience. The two fires occurred six years after the Woolsey Fire affected the same Malibu community. However, the outcomes were demonstrably different, particularly pertaining to community cohesion.

The Community Brigades consist of volunteers from fire-prone Malibu neighborhoods who undergo extensive training, directed by the Los Angeles County Fire Department and the U.S. Forest Service, to respond during a fire. This study explores how community engagement and additional interacting factors have changed fire risk ownership and response in neighborhoods where the Community Brigade program has been introduced, including Malibu West, Point Dume, Corral Canyon, Big Rock, Hidden Hills, Topanga Canyon, and Ventura County Line.

Through participant observations and semi-structured interviews with Community Brigade members, city government officials, and county government representatives, this study examined how the Community Brigade pilot program interfaced with the fire response system and the greater community during the first seven days of the Franklin and Palisades Fires.

Charred landscapes and smoke rising in eastern Malibu, CA after January 2025 wildfires forced evacuations and burned 3,000 acres.
Photo Credit: Grindstone Media Group / Shutterstock.com

Preliminary results indicate that the implementation of the Community Brigade pilot program is correlated with increased community understanding of fire risk, greater trust between the community and official response authorities, and increased community ownership of fire risk. This study provides insights into the development and implementation of the Community Brigade pilot program, with the potential to replicate it in order to strengthen the resilience of other wildfire-prone communities.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Community Brigade serves as a vital connection between the community and the fire response system. Brigade members, in their capacity as valued members of their community, shared insights with their fellow community members about the depth and breadth of the official response.
- The Community Brigade was also activated to conduct evacuations. Previous experiences in the Broad and Franklin Fires indicated that residents were more likely to evacuate when encouraged by Brigade members than officials. As a result, people were evacuated safely during both the Franklin and Palisades fires while the official response focused on structure protection and other pertinent activities.
- During the Franklin and Palisades Fires, Community Brigade members successfully protected important institutions, such as a church, and cherished family pets. Their care during that disaster is believed to have created greater trust and interest in the program, which has since received hundreds of applications from prospective volunteers.
- Representatives of the responding fire authorities confirmed that the Community Brigade increased the general public's understanding of wildfire risk and incident command, which could result in safer, better-informed decisions before and during fires as well as new approaches to reduce overall risk.

Wildland firefighters mop up after a wildfire in a drought-stricken area of California. Photo Credit: Bill Morson / Shutterstock.com

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Given a shared vision and trust, more harmonized community involvement through initiatives like the Community Brigade pilot program can work to affect fire outcomes.
- This coordinated interaction between people, local government, and the fire risk environment as demonstrated by the Community Brigades sets the stage for growth in community adaptative capacity.
- As involvement grows and an all-hazards focus widens the Community Brigades' scope, city residents begin to take mitigation measures and demonstrate risk ownership. The threat of recurrent wildfire motivates a network development that enables the community to manage risk collectively.
- The Community Brigade pilot program is a model that can be scaled through local adaptations coupled with supporting frameworks to empower the many communities that require practical risk reduction.

AUDIENCE

This research can provides insight on a new model for local governments, community leaders, fire departments, and emergency response practitioners who are interested in community-engaged approaches to reduce risk and strengthen disaster response capacity in the wildland-urban interface.

Full Report: Feldmann-Jensen, S., O'Connor, S., Jensen, S., & Woodworth, B. (2026). *Trial by Fire: The Community Brigades Pilot Program*. (Natural Hazards Center Quick Response Research Report Series, Report 369). Natural Hazards Center, University of Colorado Boulder. hazards.colorado.edu/quick-response-report/trial-by-fire

The Quick Response Research Award Program is funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF Award #1635593 and NSF Award #2536173). Opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations produced by this program are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF or Natural Hazards Center.

NATURAL HAZARDS CENTER

University of Colorado Boulder

Natural Hazards Center

Institute of Behavioral Science | University of Colorado Boulder

1440 15th Street | Boulder, CO 80309-0483 USA

hazctr@colorado.edu | (303) 492-6818