

# Looking for the helpers? That's all of us

By  Julie Drizin, Executive Director  | 22 hours ago



YisroelB5o1/Wikimedia Commons

*View of the Los Angeles wildfires from a rooftop in West Hollywood.*

Current is proud to partner with Station Resource Group and veteran public media leader Israel Smith to raise funds to help our colleagues affected by the wildfires raging in Los Angeles and environs. [Here's the link where you can donate.](#) Please read on!

These unnatural and destructive disasters — fires, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, tsunamis, storms — are exacerbated by catastrophic climate change. Wildfires are typically started by arsonists or people taking stupid risks in a dry forest or field. They're also caused by human beings taking unconscionable risks with our planet — from climate deniers in the White House to, perhaps, your own family.

Public media stations in the U.S. employ nearly 20,000 people, though layoffs are shrinking the workforce. A lowball estimate of staff for national pubmedia organizations is 1,500. And then, there are the freelancers, consultants, contractors, filmmakers and podcasters who enrich our field. I see public media as a small town of 22,000-ish people. And Current is the local town crier, the source of news about people and the organizations you work for.

And right now, the hard-working staff of LAist, KCRW, PBS SoCal, KPFF/Pacifica, Classical California, KCSN, KLCS, *Marketplace* and NPR West are **literally feeling the heat**. (Apologies if I forgot a station!)

Last year I wrote about the devastating impact of Hurricanes Helene and Milton on North Carolina, Florida and elsewhere. I reminded those of us in public media, and informed newbies, that Greater Public used to manage a mutual aid program called “**Colleagues Helping Colleagues**.” It was a moving expression of how we in public media take responsibility for one another in our small town. Each campaign gave us the chance to walk our talk, show we care and comfort our peers who’ve lost relatives, pets and homes.

Greater Public had to end that program a few years ago when the frequency of climate disasters made sustaining the fund unmanageable.

Last week I tried to do something about that. I asked American University to allow Current to fundraise for our L.A. colleagues, such as journalists working all hours to get vital information out to their communities and engineers on call 24-7 to keep stations on the air.

While waiting for an answer, I reached out to two public service media organizations for help. The **Institute for Nonprofit News** offered to collect and distribute the funds, and **News Revenue Hub** agreed to set up the donation form. Relief was on its way.

Then Izzi Smith, who works for WBUR and consults with stations through his company Listen Again Tomorrow, told me that he had launched **a fundraising campaign** with SRG as fiscal sponsor, which is not a cake walk. SRG CEO Bill Davis is the former CEO of LAist. I can’t think about L.A. without thinking about him.

I was jazzed that Izzi asked Current to partner on this effort. Of course, I said yes. So I donated, posted to social media and wrote this column.

In his **GoFundMe appeal**, Izzi wrote, “Members of the public media community in and around Los Angeles have been devastated by wildfires. They include people we see and hear every day, and people behind the scenes we may never know, but power our collective public service. They have served their communities while their own lives have been thrown into chaos.”



“We often speak of the essential strength of the public media system. NOW is a moment to demonstrate that strength in support of our colleagues in L.A.”

I asked Izzi why he took on this awesome responsibility. “The fires in L.A. are personal for me, and certainly for Bill,” he wrote. “I work with and have had colleagues in the area for decades. ...With many folks in crisis, this was how we thought we could help the most people in a meaningful way” This compassion gives me chills. Give me chills by [joining me as a supporter](#) today!

**Who will qualify for this mutual aid?** Any individual who can show proof of current employment at an L.A. pubmedia station is eligible. The first to apply will get funded, until the funds are exhausted.

If we are all so **terrifically generous** that funds are left over, SRG will donate any remaining money to another relief organization working in Southern California. The campaign will stay open at least through January and SRG expects to begin giving out mutual aid towards the end of February.

That’s what’s available to individuals. **What about the stations?** Where will they get financial support? Perhaps from wealthy Hollywood donors who still have homes. What about CPB?

It’s clearly their job and responsibility to send emergency grants to stations. But, as CPB’s spokesperson told me during the 2024 hurricanes, grants are given *only to those* who ask for a specific amount for a specific use. That does not include handing out funds directly to individuals, but it could help stations hire freelance reporters to give their journalists a break or bring in backup engineering support from other stations.

CPB has said it makes these grants as quickly as it can, which everyone knows is typically in slo-mo. Are stations required to submit a detailed grant application? Are they expected to provide a similar level of grant reporting as they do for their CSGs and program grants? I’d be surprised if the answers were no.

[In a Jan. 9 press release](#), CPB President Pat Harrison said, “As the unprecedented wildfires continue to devastate Southern California, our thoughts are with all those affected. Under the most challenging circumstances, local public media stations in the area are providing critical, accurate and lifesaving alerts and local news and

information, on air and online, to more than 18 million people. The stations are also providing real-time guides and go-to resources for those facing the immediate threat of the fires

“We are committed to supporting our public media stations and the communities they serve as we navigate this crisis together.”

It’s important that Harrison reminded everyone that public media staff are first responders, literal lifelines of vital information to their communities. But I don’t think that the statement goes far enough. It should be longer and deeper than the 89 words attributed to Pat Harrison, words that don’t sound like they came out of her mouth but instead were carefully crafted by a team of message makers. I honestly expect more from the mayor of our small town.

I’ve personally known many who’ve worked at CPB; some of these relationships go back to the 1980s. In my decade at Current, I have closely observed CPB in action and inaction. In my heart I believe that everyone at our “private corporation” deserves our gratitude for bringing their talent, time and spirit to public media’s survival. **The events in SoCal are about survival, too.**

The wildfire should be the first thing you see when you visit [cpb.org](http://cpb.org). Obviously, this public media emergency should take precedence over the required regular announcements of a CPB Board meeting ... that nobody attends. It’s more urgent than a new animated series coming to PBS Kids **eight months from now.**

While CPB’s website is aimed at the public, I suspect that it’s mostly people in our small town who drop by. Many more than listeners, viewers or critics of public funding.

CPB should also be more explicit with all of us and the public about the specific support they have typically provided to federally funded stations. And **say their names:** LAist, KPFFK, PBS SoCal, and so on.

Finally, may I be so bold as to suggest that the leaders and stewards of our beloved public media system should join this urgent campaign by personally donating to this common cause. There’s no good reason not to. As our stations say on air during fund drives: “Every dollar counts!”



For media and partnership opportunities, please contact [mmueller@kusc.org](mailto:mmueller@kusc.org).