

Tips For Journalists Covering Disasters In California

Emergency incidents, especially where officials close areas due to a public safety menace, may include natural disasters (wildfires, earthquakes) and commercial accidents (plane crashes, toxic material spills). This document is merely a local supplement for California. It is not a substitute for your newsroom policies or your own research. This is not legal advice, which can only be provided by a licensed attorney. These tips do NOT cover unlawful assembly (protests, riots; instead see [Tips For Safely Covering Protests](#)). If you have any other questions, email pressrights@lapressclub.org. *Last updated February 26, 2025.*

BEFORE YOU ARRIVE

Prepare for the specific disaster you are covering. You must understand the type of disaster you are heading into and how it may evolve. This often requires training, experience, and working with seasoned colleagues. Carefully evaluate gear. Make a checklist to manage your go-bag and appropriate attire/shoes. Consider possible safety risks on your body: lanyards can snag or be yanked, makeup can interact with tear gas, many clothes can restrict evacuation. Leave valuables and bulky items at home. Seek expert advice on advanced PPE (gas masks, flame-resistant clothing, trauma kits). Just as important as having safety gear is knowing how to use it and keeping it in working order. Consider if you should be working with specialists in and out of your newsroom, including professional security consultants and on-site “backwatchers.” Examples of disaster-specific info that may help:

- [SPJ's Wildfire Guide List](#)
- [NYT story on wildfire journalism](#)
- [SEJ's Wildfire Resources](#)
- [RSF Safety Guide](#)
- [National Interagency Fire Center](#)
- [Western Fire Chiefs Association](#)
- [Local News Go Bag](#)
- [NBCU Academy on wildfire reporting](#)

Make a personal risk assessment. Disasters threaten life, including your own. Consider whether you're actually prepared to run toward danger. Have your affairs in order: Physician Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment (POLST), medical power of attorney, general power of attorney, will and insurance. More common, you may need mental health services to process vicarious trauma. Consider long-term toxic exposure risks. You have the right to refuse overly unsafe assignments to disaster zones without discipline under [California Labor Code §1139](#). If your newsroom is unionized, your contract may give you additional rights to refuse potentially hazardous work and/or be provided with safety equipment. Check with your steward.

Identify the government agency/agencies likely to have jurisdiction. California has about [600 law enforcement agencies](#), not to mention fire departments and other emergency responders like [California Governor's Office of Emergency Services \(Cal OES\)](#) and [California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection \(CAL FIRE\)](#). Jurisdictions are complex. Sometimes cities exist entirely inside of other cities. State laws for press access don't apply on federal property. Mutual aid, where agencies support each other, is common in large incidents.

Obtain contact information for the agency's Public Information Officer (PIO). Large agencies often have a PIO on call 24/7 for emergencies (they appreciate lead time for general inquiries). Ideally, reach out early to discuss arrival (potentially parking and where to keep your car away from activity) and exit plans. Recognize that PIOs may be overwhelmed.

Print all information you need. Mobile phones break, and connectivity and power may go out. Consider what would happen if your phone were lost (both data security AND getting home). Carry physical identification, emergency contacts, this document, etc. Have a physical map, study landmarks in case street signs burn, and mark them up with temporary features like command posts, evacuation centers, and safety perimeters.

Carry durable "indicia" of your status as press. Credentials are a complicated topic. They're not the only factor that makes somebody press and no law requires them. However, you must be able to provide reasonable "indicia" if stopped by officials in closed areas or during curfew. These may include but are not limited to law enforcement press passes, employer ID, press association ID, professional camera equipment, relevant business licenses, or published bylines. At minimum, carry business cards and written work phone numbers (ideally a 24/7 newsdesk and/or corporate security desk). Freelancers should print any letter (email) of assignment. Also carry a government-issued ID like a driver license.

Tell your newsroom managers or trusted colleagues where you'll be. Plan to check in at a specific time so they know you're OK after. Make sure they have contact info for PIOs and an attorney you know will be reachable. Discuss risks, communications, and emergency plans.

Consider safer alternatives: Disaster coverage goes beyond the scene. You can interview evacuees, report on available help for evacuees, share how others can provide help (ex: certain items like clothes aren't helpful, others are urgently needed), cover environmental factors, etc.

ON THE SCENE

Establish contact with public officials early. Connect with a PIO or supervisor on the scene. Write down their name. Ask the best and worst places to go, including parking. You don't want to obstruct emergency vehicles, and TV trucks have even been destroyed where a flash flood was predictable. Communicate often, unless it distracts emergency responders from doing their job. Respect command posts. Be mindful of any safety concerns.

Be able to articulate your access rights. Press are explicitly exempt from California laws used to close public spaces during emergencies. However, front-line law enforcement may be unaware. Ask for a supervisor or PIO, and reference [California Penal Code §409.5\(d\)\(1\)](#) for most disaster areas, [§409.6\(d\)](#) for avalanche, [§409.7](#) for unlawful assembly (including curfew). Press may not be kept out for their own safety, however if an official warns you it is dangerous that can make you liable for your own safety in a closed area. As long as you do not interfere with an operation or investigation, any journalist should be permitted to go into the closed area to report on and inform the public about these highly newsworthy disaster areas.

Who qualifies for press access? Colloquially, a good rule of thumb is that you can demonstrate "premeditated intent to inform the public" using indicia described above. This does

not include producing entertainment or self-promotional content. A committee of First Amendment lawyers wrote this memo on the [Definition of Protected Journalist for Penal Code Section 409.7\(a\)](#), which independent press may want to print in advance. While freelancers and students qualify for the same access protections, they may lack resources needed to safely cover a disaster. Don't jeopardize yourself or those who would be needed to rescue you.

Know your legal limits: Press must remain on public property. Press are NOT allowed to: [obstruct emergency operations](#); engage in activities with no newsgathering purpose; [transport non-press](#) (unless for a safety reason); fly drones or other aircraft without FAA authorization; trespass on private property without owner permission; or enter closed federal property. Any related conduct may give officials grounds to remove you from a closed area.

Be alert. Safety comes first. Identify multiple exit plans and meeting points. Along with 360° awareness, look up and below. Set a phone timer for every 15 minutes as a reminder to look around and reevaluate. Understand the impact camera lighting/flashes may have on others.

Work as a team. Write an emergency contact's phone number on your arm. Use a buddy system and watch each other's backs. Exchange contact info with others on the beat.

Be clear to front-line personnel that you are press. Press rarely have uniforms or credentials from local agencies. Front line responders need indications to know your role. Be professional. Vocalize you are "press" AND who you're reporting for (be specific and give brief context, personnel may not recognize outlets/call letters). Consider wearing identifying clothing or credentials, though avoid lanyards that could snag. With armed law enforcement, explain you're reaching for your press credentials before reaching into a pocket or bag. Recognize that front-line personnel can change over quickly, and some are called in from non-field duties to assist in situations they didn't prepare for. If there's confusion, it can help to mention the PIO or other contact person's name you wrote down when you first arrived.

Evaluate the scene's impact on you: If you've been exposed to chemicals, ash, or smoke, make sure to remove clothing and footwear before entering your home. Pay attention for signs of vicarious trauma and seek counseling as needed.

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

If detained or obstructed, say you are press and ask for a PIO or supervisor. Be polite. Keep recording. If someone says their instructions are not to let press through, ask WHO gave instructions. This is not the place for a nuanced First Amendment discussion, so speak in terms law enforcement uses: "Penal Code" 409.5(d)(1), 409.6(d), and/or 409.7 "exempt press."

If asked for your recording equipment, do not consent. Remind them you are a journalist, the items are owned by your company, and they must first contact your company's attorney.

If arrested, contact a lawyer. Ideally, have a phone number in advance for one who will be reachable. If your newsroom doesn't provide one, several groups may be able to help (sometimes free) or provide referrals. None can guarantee representation, but if you have an active concern check these [Legal Hotlines And Resources For Journalists In California](#).