



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO NEWS RELEASE

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FIRE VICTIM COUNSELS NEIGHBORS: “AS THEY HEAL, I HEAL WITH THEM” ***County Receives \$2 Million to Fund Mental Health Services***

Nearly six months after the wildfires, Spring brings new signs of life in the communities affected by the disaster. As fire victims continue to rebuild their homes and lives, the County of San Diego Mental Health Services' community outreach workers have been helping them restore their sense of balance and normalcy. Thanks to a \$2 million FEMA grant, the County will continue providing mental health services beyond the one-year anniversary of the fires.

“This is great news for fire victims. Thanks to this new FEMA grant, the County's Mental Health Services will be able to continue providing the help fire victims need to rebuild their lives and their emotional well-being,” said Alfredo Aguirre, Director of the County's Mental Health Services division. “When a disaster strikes, it's natural for victims to express disbelief, sadness, anxiety, and depression in the days, weeks and months that follow.”

When the fires began, Mental Health Services immediately applied for and received a \$1.5 million FEMA grant to dispatch mental health crisis counselors to the communities impacted by the disaster. Since November, 36 outreach workers have been going door-to-door, providing mental health services and referrals in the Ramona, Fallbrook, and Jamul-Dulzura communities.

To date, during individual visits, mental health counselors have assisted more than 500 children and teens impacted by the fires, 2,300 people ages 18-64, and 400 older adults. Furthermore, they have reached more than 13,800 people at group and community settings and have distributed information to more than 105,000 people. The \$2 million grant, which started April 15, allows outreach workers to continue providing mental health services for an additional nine months, well past the first anniversary of the fires, when feelings of anger, desperation and hopelessness tend to resurface.

“The community and the support system have been very impressive,” said Ruby Pressnell, who lost her Lake Hodges home and most of her possessions in the fires.



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When the fires began, it appeared that the place she called “home” for 14 years would be spared. Two days later, after she and several relatives had evacuated, Pressnell watched the house burn on local television news. “The people who have lived through it are still trying to get their lives back together. So, to have programs that last a little longer that reach out to people...is really, really helpful,” added Pressnell, who now rents a home nearby.

No one understands the stress and grief experienced by fire victims more distinctly or completely than Yvonne Purdy-Luxton. She is a county mental health outreach worker in the Jamul-Dulzura community. While helping neighbors recover and rebuild, Purdy-Luxton is, herself, coping with the aftermath of the fires. The Harris Fire claimed nearly every possession owned by Purdy-Luxton and her teenage daughter. They lost a house and four outbuildings on the Dulzura property that has been in the family for four generations.

Purdy-Luxton has found strength and hope through serving others. “I just go lot-to-lot and meet and greet and try to pull them in and give them some support...because after that process it was just so devastating that they just had nothing,” said Purdy-Luxton, who has personally met with more than 1,500 people in several rural communities.

The new funds from FEMA, she said, “Came at the right time.... because some people in the region are just getting ready to move on. What I am seeing is a lot of post-traumatic stress disorder and it’s just surfacing now. There’s anger. There’s frustration,” added Purdy-Luxton, who works for Community Research Foundation, one of the County’s partners in assisting fire victims.

For now, she and her daughter reside in a FEMA trailer home, waiting to gather enough money to rebuild. Like many of her neighbors, Purdy-Luxton did not have homeowners insurance.

As she meets and counsels her neighbors, she is able to share stories, offer advice and empathize with their frustrations.

“They’re grateful because I do know what it’s like. I’ve been there. I can share with them and as they heal, I can heal with them,” she concluded.

Fire victims in need of mental health services should call the County’s Access and Crisis Line, (800) 479-3339.

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