

California Disaster Relief stymied during fires as COVID-19 impacts response protocol

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA, Calif. (BP) – As monster fires displace tens of thousands of Californians, Southern Baptist disaster relief volunteers are stymied by changes in response protocols necessitated by COVID-19.

Before the pandemic, volunteers in relief efforts were able to provide food and chaplains' assistance to displaced residents housed at American Red Cross shelters.

"With COVID rules the Red Cross is not putting people up in congregate shelters," said Mike Bivins, disaster relief director with the California Southern Baptist Convention (CSBC). "Feeding and chaplaincy work was done in the shelters, and they are not setting up any overnight congregate shelters."

Instead, those forced to flee the flames are being given vouchers for hotel housing in multiple locations.

"It's really in a way sort of frustrating because ... people are just scattered," Bivins said. "With COVID and non-congregate sheltering, it's difficult to set up and serve meals."

The Red Cross, a Southern Baptist disaster relief partner, has set up evacuation centers where evacuees can use restrooms and get snacks, hotel vouchers and information. Southern Baptist volunteers remain on standby in case the Red Cross calls for help.

Individual Southern Baptist churches in the state have offered

to help displaced residents and receive any needed supplies from the state convention.

"Right now, the churches seem to be handling it on their own," he said.

Bivins said Sunday through Thursday (Aug. 16-20), a church that chose not to be identified housed 13 people who had evacuated an eldercare home because of the Jones Fire in Nevada County. He said he has received no reports of churches being damaged by fires.

At least 326 blazes statewide, comprising 23 separate complexes or sets of fires, have killed at least five people, destroyed more than 500,000 acres of land including at least 175 homes and buildings, and displaced residents from 64,000 or more homes, according to The Associated Press and the Mercury News of San Jose.

Tens of thousands of homes are threatened by the blazes. Santa Cruz, a town of about 65,000, has been placed on an evacuation standby, California fire officials told the AP.

Robert Lawler, director of missions for the Redwood Empire Association, serves an area impacted by fires in Vacaville and Napa. He said homes of at least three church members in rural areas of Vacaville were destroyed, but no churches in the association have been damaged. He said the displaced families are staying with relatives.

"Praise God, a lot of these fires start in rural, wooded areas away from homes," Lawler said, "and so at this point we haven't heard of any injuries or losses to church property."

Lawler said he voluntarily evacuated his home Thursday as fires approached. He stayed at Grace Fellowship Church in Dixon, Calif., but was able to return home safely the next day.

"We saw the fires. They were actually coming down towards us from the northwest and then the fire breached the freeway south of us," he said. "Basically it created a C-shape where the only way to get out of the city was eastbound. ... We just decided to evacuate on our own at that point."

The largest fires are three complexes north, east and south of the San Francisco Bay area that had destroyed a combined 770 square miles of forests, canyons and rural areas as of Friday, according to the AP, as thousands of acres burned elsewhere in the state.

Lightning strikes sparked many of the fires. Hot temperatures and erratic winds caused some fires to double in size overnight and have enabled fires to spread in multiple directions, officials told the AP. Slightly cooler temperatures are expected this weekend.

According to the AP, three people died as a result of fires in Napa County. One person died in neighboring Solano County and another died in western Fresno County in central California. At least two people were missing and at least 30 civilians and firefighters have been injured, authorities told the AP.

More than 10,000 firefighters have been deployed to fight the fires, including about 3,000 added since Thursday, according to the AP.