

Wildfires Expose Gaps in Disaster Relief for Undocumented Communities

By *Claudia Boyd-Barrett* • Jan 7, 2020

Shortly after two fires broke out almost simultaneously in Ventura County last October, residents started calling administrators of a local charitable fund called the 805 UndocuFund to ask for financial help.

Most of the callers were farmworkers who'd lost work during the fires because smoke and evacuations forced their employers to temporarily shut operations. Some were families who'd lost power, and with it a weeks' worth of food because their refrigerators turned off. Others had been forced to pay for childcare they couldn't afford after area schools closed.

Because of their immigration status, the callers couldn't claim unemployment benefits or other government-sponsored disaster relief. But since many of them already lived on limited incomes, just a small financial hit could mean not being able to pay rent or put food on the table.

"For a lot of farmworker families, even losing a day of work is really difficult if you're living paycheck to paycheck and don't have any access to unemployment benefits," said Lucus Zucker, communications and policy director at the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), which helps administer the UndocuFund. "Even just a couple days of work lost due to smoke or power outage can be pretty financially devastating."

*Undocumented people are among the most vulnerable populations when it comes to the impact of wildfires. A **recent policy brief** by the University of California Center Sacramento described how emergency response and recovery efforts during the 2017*

Thomas Fire in Ventura County overlooked undocumented immigrants. That's largely because undocumented communities often don't show up in official census records, and they can't claim federal disaster assistance. Language and cultural barriers can also make it hard for undocumented immigrants to access emergency information.

In Ventura County, the 805 UndocuFund—originally set up as a stop-gap solution for immigrants affected by the Thomas Fire—has become the undocumented community's go-to resource. Administrators were about to close the fund at the end of 2018, but then the giant Woolsey Fire hit. Twelve months later, as they wrapped up applications for the Woolsey Fire, the Easy and Maria fires exploded.

"It's difficult because it feels like this never-ending uphill climb against these wildfires now," said Zucker. "It takes us a year to process everybody because we don't have the resources of FEMA and the federal government, or even some of these larger organizations like the Red Cross and United Way. And so by the time we're getting through one fire, the next fire's already hitting."

In Sonoma County, the Graton Day Labor Center reopened its own UndocuFund following the Kincade Fire in October. The center originally established the fund in 2017, after the Tubb's Fire, which at the time was the most destructive fire in California's history.

Around 1,500 people have applied to the fund this time around, mainly laborers who lost wages due to evacuations and business closures, said the center's director, Christy Lubin.

"We look at ourselves as kind of stepping in and doing what the government does for its legalized citizens," she said. "Realistically, it's a drop in the bucket."

Lubin said she thinks the state needs to come up with its own disaster relief fund for undocumented residents, rather than relying on non-profits. The emergency alert system for immigrant communities should also be improved, she said. The UC Center brief echoes these recommendations.

Meanwhile, Jose Torres, energy equity program manager with the California Environmental Justice Alliance, a statewide coalition of community environmental groups, said people with limited incomes in general suffer disproportionately during blackouts and evacuations.

While these events can impact anyone, it's much harder for people with limited incomes to recover from losing all their groceries during a power outage, missing work because of a shutoff, or having to relocate during an evacuation, he said.

Wildfire smoke is an added health hazard for people living in neighborhoods that already have high levels of air pollution, he added. Many of these are neighborhoods occupied primarily by people of color with limited incomes.

"Then if something like a shutoff happens it's just another thing that piles on," he said. "It just makes things that much worse."

In the short term, Torres said authorities need to do a better job of reaching out to vulnerable communities during wildfires and power shutoffs, and ensuring people have backup generation for their food.

Over the longer term, his organization is advocating for systemic changes that could help make communities more resilient, such as establishing locally owned energy systems and investing in solar energy storage that people can use to power their homes during an outage.

“We’re hoping to create a system that’s more adaptable to climate change,” he said. A system that is “more aligned to what the community needs.”