

State Independent Living Council (SILC)

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**Issue Brief****The Impact of 2003 Wildfires on People with Disabilities
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During October of 2003, the worst wildfire disaster in our nation's history struck Southern California. Unlike many prior emergencies, this disaster consisted of a series of fires that started in multiple counties for a variety of causes. The final toll on the state and the people who live here was horrendous. During the fires, which totaled 19 throughout the state, more than 730,000 acres were burned, over 36,000 homes were destroyed, 22 people were killed, more than 200 more were injured, and over 500 farms and commercial properties were significantly damaged. Many pets and livestock also perished in the fires, and those loss estimates vary from hundreds to the thousands.

The October fires struck during severe Santa Ana windstorms in Southern California. Winds up to and exceeding 70 miles per hour drove the flames faster than any response team can handle, and burning embers were blown far ahead of the main fires where they started additional blazes.

Many local fire response teams were on loan to fight fires in other areas when an errant hunter started the fires in San Diego County, delaying the ability to control or even fight the firestorm that decimated entire communities in the county. Electrical power lines that sparked some of the blazes were shut down as a precaution, to avoid additional fires, resulting in loss of electricity in rural areas throughout the south state. This impacted the notification and evacuation processes.

People with disabilities were especially hard hit by these disasters, although no exact monetary figures have been produced to show the extent of that damage. With approximately 6% of the state's population having a disability, and many of those individuals unable to evacuate themselves, see approaching danger, or hear announcements to evacuate, they are especially vulnerable to these wildfires and other natural disasters.

Preparation for fires and other emergencies by people with disabilities is a component of, and critical to the success of, the mission of the State Independent Living Council (SILC). The SILC has participated in statewide disaster planning for several years, for the purpose of helping emergency response and shelter organizations be better prepared to deal successfully with disability-related needs in disasters. SILC members and staff have

also provided leadership and guidance to projects that have developed fire and disaster preparation and evacuation materials at the statewide and national levels.

During January and February the SILC held public forums in San Bernardino and San Diego County, which were the counties where the most damage and loss of life occurred. The SILC's purpose was to hear from agencies serving the community or responding to the disaster, as well as from individuals with disabilities who were impacted. Because many of their homes had been destroyed or public transportation was not available, the turnout of people with disabilities at the two forums was relatively light. However the agencies and those individuals that did respond via email or by attending were able to detail some of the critical problems that occurred. They also provided some potential solutions to assure that such loss and confusion does not occur in the future.

The areas impacting the disability community the most were:

- Preparation
- Notification
- Evacuation
- Sheltering and interim services
- and Recovery.

This issue brief will recap some of the major points that were brought out in the forums, and will also provide some recommendations that were made as a result of the testimony that was presented or received by other means.

Preparation

California residents have dealt with many natural disasters in the past, including earthquakes, fires, and floods. Periodic power outages during 2001 resulted in several press releases and advisories being distributed about how to be prepared in the event of emergencies, and these materials were specifically directed at people with disabilities and those who are elderly.

For individuals who have conditions requiring periodic medication or specialized durable medical equipment or supplies, advisories have pointed out the need to prepare a small suitcase for emergencies. The bag should be packed with several days' supply of medication, durable medical or urological supplies, and prescriptions that can be easily accessed in the event of an evacuation. Despite such warnings, many people were not prepared for what occurred in October.

The mountains of Southern California are rugged, and homes throughout the region are located in isolated and undeveloped areas. Many of these homes do not have telephones or public water systems, and must rely on wells that are operated by electricity. People who relied on electricity for cellular phones or water pumps were

unable to learn that fires were approaching, protect their homes, or hear warnings that they were to evacuate.

Residents who had not created a defensible fire-safe perimeter around their homes were in greatest danger of loss when the fires struck. For people who are elderly, or whose disabilities prevented them from cutting back brush and trees, they were unable to create these safety zones without assistance.

The SILC also learned that local Independent Living Centers and paratransit providers were not included in the emergency planning process. As two of the many types of community-based organizations that serve people with disabilities and seniors, they were able to make up for some of the deficits that became apparent when the fires struck despite being excluded from the planning processes.

Notification

The notification methods used in the Southern California firestorms were haphazard at best. In many cases local fire officials and police agencies had no time to assure that broadcast media learned of the updated evacuation needs of the affected counties. Fast-moving fires necessitated having deputies or highway patrol officers race ahead of the fires and announce the need to evacuate using the loudspeakers on their patrol cars. When reports were issued on television, they were usually not captioned, unless captioning was done at a later time. This impacted people who were Deaf and who could only see pictures of the fires—not realizing they were in danger.

Television and radio signals are not available in many isolated and mountainous areas of the region. During the fires the news stations in the Los Angeles area were concentrating on fires in Los Angeles and San Diego Counties, while many residents in adjacent San Bernardino County were frustrated in their attempts to learn about the need to evacuate. Without established notification systems such as enhanced or reverse 911 in the affected counties, there was no way to advise those trapped in remote areas about the threat to their safety.

People who are blind were unable to hear local radio announcements and would be unlikely to be watching (or listening to) television. In some cases, those notified to evacuate were not advised which direction to flee, or what location could be used as an emergency gathering point. As a result people fled to public facilities that were being evacuated, or were directed to shelters that later had to be evacuated as the fires changed directions and covered much more territory than was originally anticipated.

With a reverse 911 system in operation, public safety authorities would have had an opportunity to call everyone in an affected area to alert them to the need to evacuate. With an enhanced 911 system, dispatchers at a central location would be able to produce a list of people who might have mobility issues or be unable to evacuate themselves in an

emergency. Those who testified at the SILC forums did not believe that such systems were in place locally at the time of the Southern California fires.

Evacuation

Once the community learned of the need to evacuate, there was a rush to reach safety. People loaded valuable possessions into their vehicles and began to drive toward what they felt was the safest location. In rural areas this caused extreme congestion and in some cases led to backups of three or four hours to cover a few miles. Evacuation plans for rural areas in San Bernardino County had been established that designated some roads for one-way traffic, which would allow people to escape at twice the rate. However, during this disaster, the plan was not implemented and congestion continued.

There is little public transportation in the remote areas of San Diego and San Bernardino counties for people who are unable to drive themselves. This includes individuals who are blind, or who do not own cars because of the cost or with problems driving. In some cases neighbors did not even know where individuals who needed such assistance lived, and distant family members had no way to contact them to see if they had safely fled the area.

Where transit is available, as in the rural areas in San Bernardino County, additional problems occurred. Mountain Area Rural Transit Agency (MARTA) evacuated dozens of people with disabilities, as MARTA drivers on duty knew where their more frequent riders lived. When the drivers tried to return to the remote areas to evacuate more people who they had been unable to transport on earlier trips, they were blocked from entering by public safety officers who had been instructed to keep people out of those zones. This resulted in several hours' delay in the evacuation process.

With the power out in most areas of the affected counties, agencies that had access to lists of people who might need assistance with evacuation were not able to be contacted. In most cases their own employees were not at work as the agencies had closed or lost power due to the fires.

In San Diego County, a list had been distributed to all local fire agencies that listed people receiving disability-related services from the county. However, those lists were locked in secure locations in the local fire stations during the first few days of the disaster, and no regular personnel were manning those stations. The lack of a centralized dispatching system to coordinate efforts between the many communities in these counties also affected the ability to assure that every area requiring evacuation had been notified.

Many individuals who require mobility aids to walk or move themselves were evacuated without those items. In San Bernardino County, the residents of two skilled nursing facilities were evacuated to the Grace Chapel near Norton Air Force Base. Many more individuals with mobility impairments were brought to the main shelter at Norton AFB, where they were restricted to their beds until volunteers could carry them to the restrooms

when needed. Evacuation planning did not include vehicles that could also transport wheelchairs and walkers so evacuees with disabilities could maneuver in whatever environment they were placed in, without assistance.

Sheltering

Because of the rapid and unpredictable movement of the fires, new facilities were often used as shelters. The local Red Cross volunteers received praise for their efforts in this disaster, but in many cases the shelters were inaccessible to people with mobility disabilities and those who use service animals were not initially allowed to bring their animals with them into the shelters. People who are Deaf were unable to receive news in the shelters, as there were no interpreters available initially, they couldn't understand the public address systems, and televisions were not captioned. People who relied on specialized medication and who did not have prescriptions or a supply with them were placed in danger due to medical conditions.

Emergency telephone access was provided through prior arrangements with a vendor that utilized a special trailer that had no telephones located within reach ranges of people using wheelchairs, and no telecommunication devices for people who are Deaf. Because of the rapid set-up of the facilities to be used for shelter, there was often cable strung across the floor in a manner that blocked people using mobility devices, and this was especially true where the news media had set up banks of equipment to broadcast nationwide. The areas where donated emergency clothing was gathered and distributed were often at a sufficient distance from the shelters, on inaccessible routes, so that people using mobility devices had trouble reaching them. When other people with disabilities who were not impacted by the fire attempted to volunteer at shelter sites, they were turned away instead of being allowed to assist.

Recovery

For people whose homes were not destroyed, the process of returning home was very complicated—especially if they were people with disabilities. Local transit agencies, where available, relaxed restrictions and allowed people to return home with the donated goods they had received during the sheltering phase. In some cases that meant that only two or three people could fit with their donated supplies on a standard paratransit vehicle. Even the fixed-route buses relaxed their rules and allowed people to bring pets, food and other needed items on the trip home.

A rapid escalation in scarce rental housing has resulted in eviction of low-income residents of these counties, especially if they relied on the HUD Section 8 voucher program to help subsidize those rents. A complete lack of affordable housing has caused some people to migrate elsewhere, rather than try to remain in the general areas where they lived prior to the fire. Limited availability of contractors to make home repairs or construct new homes has been especially difficult for people who require different levels of accessibility. Specialized contractors may not be available, and their work backlog

could extend for months or years. For the person who is unable to access most of the available stock of housing due to a mobility impairment, this is a critical issue.

Transit agencies expended hundreds of hours of overtime during this disaster and operated beyond normal working hours. Their dedicated employees assured that many people were rescued who might otherwise become fire victims. Some of those transit agencies have unreimbursed expenses and were initially denied payment. This will impact their ability to improve their infrastructure, their equipment, and ability to respond to future disasters, and should be corrected if at all possible.

While the SILC and other agencies provided some emergency funding to help people who were impacted by the fire, not everyone was able to receive it. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and state application process was ponderous at times. Individuals who had returned to isolated areas might be unaware of, or unable to access, the locations where applications could be submitted.

This is a landmark disaster that should not be forgotten, and it behooves the public service agencies and the citizens of California to cooperate to the fullest extent and focus our efforts on being completely prepared for whatever future disasters might occur.

Recommendations

Preparation

- Prepare and distribute updated press releases and brochures relating to steps to be taken by individuals with disabilities and seniors in preparation for disasters and/or evacuation.
- Establish enhanced 911 systems throughout the state that allow public safety entities to access a list of individuals who may need specialized assistance of some type in an emergency or evacuation.
 - Establish training programs through statewide advocacy programs to educate consumers about the need to provide personal information to such secure systems.
 - Assure that emergency services personnel are familiar with how to communicate with people with all types of disabilities in emergencies.
- Create awareness of the need to clear brush, grass and debris from around structures in rural settings.
 - Encourage or establish volunteer programs in each county that can assist individuals with this task when they are unable to do so themselves.
- Create volunteer or public safety programs that can assist individuals with disabilities and seniors in completing a home assessment regarding safety.
 - Encourage manufacturers to standardize smoke alarms for home use so that each unit is equipped with 10-year Lithium batteries and a visible strobe flasher.

- Establish programs through local fire agencies to perform periodic review of proper installation and operation of home smoke alarms.
- Provide a recommended list of critical items to be evacuated in the event of an emergency so that people with disabilities and seniors can have these items readily available.
- Educate the television media about the need to caption emergency announcements on local television stations whenever a real-time emergency announcement is made. Vendors are available to perform this service at both local and national levels.

Notification

- Activate Enhanced 911 and/or Reverse 911 systems. These systems can have compatibility problems with Telecommunications Devices for the Deaf (TDDs). When such technology is purchased this must be factored into the decisions about which systems to buy.
- Assure that notification systems are in place, including reverse 911 systems, that can also advise individuals with disabilities through use of TTYs if necessary.
- Assure that local news related to evacuation announcements is presented on television stations that cover an expanded area. This relates to the inability of people in San Bernardino County to receive notifications concerning county conditions during the October fires, as Los Angeles stations were not targeting news in those areas.
- Volunteer organizations serving people with disabilities and seniors should assign members to maintain and operate a “phone tree” for notifying association members in the event of area emergencies.

Evacuation

- Transit agencies need to play a key role in local and statewide emergency planning.
- Paratransit rider lists should be available for emergency services personnel to use in contacting transit-dependent individuals in the event of an emergency.
- Transit vehicles need to be treated as emergency vehicles for purposes of evacuation.
 - Driver training certification programs need to be established.
 - Transit vehicles need access to fire zones for emergency purposes even after roads have been closed to non-emergency vehicles.
 - Emergency services personnel should be willing to escort one or more transit vehicles through danger areas in event of emergency.
 - Transit agencies should be reimbursed for excess costs related to emergency services.

- Transit agency dispatchers should relay updates about emergency situations received from drivers to media or family members of passengers living in affected zones.
- Transit vehicles should be stocked with emergency preparedness and evacuation brochures and similar safety-related materials.
- Paratransit dispatchers should routinely call regular riders when emergencies occur to ensure that they are aware of the situation and to schedule rides if needed. If unable to contact, emergency services personnel should be notified.

Shelter and Interim Services

- The mainstream shelter system should be accessible to people with all types of disabilities, and their service animals if needed.
- Designated shelter sites should be reviewed for accessibility prior to using in emergencies.
 - Television sets used in shelters should be equipped for captioning.
- A list of local interpreter referral agencies or independent interpreters should be on hand so that they can be contacted if someone with a hearing impairment arrives at a shelter.
- Shelter volunteers should be trained in how to interact with people with all types of disabilities.
- Local hospitals, medical suppliers, and disability advocacy groups should be contacted in advance to determine the availability of necessary supplies in the event of emergencies.
- Once shelters are in use, walkways and other features should be kept clear for movement by people with mobility impairments.
 - Media outlets should be advised that cables should not be strung across walkways unless they have proper materials to prevent them from becoming obstacles for wheelchair or scooter users.
- Communication equipment for people with disabilities must be available in each shelter location.
 - If emergency telephone trailers are provided, at least one telephone should be within wheelchair reach ranges and another should be equipped with a TTY for use by people who are Deaf.
- If public address systems are used, individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing should be notified separately so that they will be aware of general information available to other inhabitants of the shelter.
- If individuals who are sheltered are provided with replacement supplies, food or medicine from an outside source, individuals with disabilities should be provided access to those same resources through an accessible path of travel or by use of an accessible means of transportation.

- Individuals with disabilities are qualified to assist with sheltering functions during emergencies. Shelter managers should be aware of how to accommodate any disability-related needs of such volunteers, and to assure that these volunteers are utilized when they offer assistance.

Recovery

- Volunteer organizations should be enlisted to ensure that individuals with disabilities and seniors who are unable to clean up their properties after a disaster have assistance available to them.
- If public transportation is utilized for return of transit-dependent individuals to their homes after an emergency, arrangements should be made for transfer of any donated materials and personal belongings at the same time.
- Emergency rent controls need to be established in counties where disasters occur, in order to assure that increases in rent prices will not prevent people with disabilities and others on low fixed incomes from remaining in their community of choice.