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SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Tea Fire funds in the hands of those in need



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Santa Barbara Tea Fire Response
Fund volunteer spokesperson George
Leis speaks at a presentation
announcing the final distribution of
relief funds intended for victims of the
Tea Fire.

NIK BLASKOVICH/NEWS-PRESS



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United Way has made the final allocation of relief funds intended for people affected by the Tea Fire.

In all, \$435,319 in donations has been given out. The last installment was \$44,101.

Pictured are volunteers and Tea Fire Oversight Committee members, from left, George Leis, G. Paul Didier, Pamela Voge, Louise Kolbert, Donald Ross, Les Carroll, Charles Buckley, Michael Granados, Salud Carbajal, Marty Blum, Carlson Lima and Joel Goforth.

"Every penny, including interest, went to help people affected by the fire," Paul Didier, president of Santa Barbara County's United Way, said during a presentation Monday. "Not one cent went to the fire fund."

Mr. Didier said that the money has been thoroughly vetted, making it "as clean and rewarding as people can make it."

There were 101 applicants who received funds from the United Way, all of whom had to pass through a rigorous inspection process. According to a press release from the United Way, an experienced case manager worked closely with those affected by the Tea Fire to identify their needs.

Recommendations were then made to a screening subcommittee comprising 13 volunteers from public and private charity organizations. Their findings were passed on to an oversight committee comprising local community leaders, who again checked to insure that all money was needed and would be properly handled -- and they attached a timeline for the disbursement.

The qualification for receiving funds was a demonstration of need, either by not having insurance or by not having sufficient insurance. There was no known fraud involved in the process, the United Way reported.

Carlos Lima, owner of Chef Carlos Lima catering service, was on the verge of losing his business when the Tea Fire struck his home.

"I lost everything," he said. "I had all my catering equipment in my garage. I had about a half hour to get prepared. I got all my documents and clothes, but I didn't have time to get the equipment."

Mr. Lima estimated his equipment loss to be \$5,000.

All of this equipment has been replaced by the United Way, he said. "I've been back in business since I got my equipment back, about three months after the fire. The Red Cross has really been fantastic. It feels really good, really wonderful to be able to give back to the community. Thank you, Santa Barbara."

The funds were rarely given in cash, Mr. Didier said, with most funds going directly to

the purchase of needed materials, such as materials needed for small businesses or furniture for houses. Purchases were supervised by the United Way and made locally wherever possible. Donations were culled from more than 500 individuals and organizations and given to those in need as well.

The funds were disbursed in five installments, beginning in February and continuing every few months, with priority given to those most in need.

In February, about 90 percent of the \$77,203 given during the first disbursement was going to self-sufficiency, or equipment used in small businesses. As the year progressed, more and more money was used to pay for housing, and later furniture and clothes. At the final disbursement, only about 15 percent was going toward self-sufficiency, with about 40 percent going toward housing and about 45 percent going to furniture and clothes.

Forty-three percent of all funds went to housing, 27 percent was in the self-sufficiency category, 13 percent went toward household needs such as furniture and clothes, 14 percent went to medical care, and 3 percent was spent on school supplies.

As Mr. Didier explained, many of those affected by the Tea Fire were from lower-income areas, with about 90 percent of those affected being renters, so a large percentage of the funds went to basic staples.

The United Way is now preparing another round of appraisals and fundraising to help the victims of the May 5 Jesusita Fire. They are already reviewing applications for assistance, which will go through the same process as applicants for the Tea Fire disaster assistance did.

Mr. Didier said that the recent rash of fires in Santa Barbara County, totaling four large blazes in less than two years, created a new attitude in the community.

"There's much more sensitivity to disasters," he said.

"The community will keep on adapting, because clearly this will not be the last one."

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