

Tea Fire Fund Distributes \$435,512 in Donations

Final checks have been issued, with only a few of the 101 applicants denied money in the past year



Montecito Fire Protection District Chief Kevin Wallace, left, and Santa Barbara City Fire Department Chief Andrew DiMizio address Monday's news conference at United Way of Santa Barbara County to announce final results of the Tea Fire Recovery Fund. (Giana Magnoli / Noozhawk photo)

By [Giana Magnoli, Noozhawk Staff Writer](#) | Published on 11.16.2009

Like thousands of other residents last November, Carlos Lima was at work when he checked on the progress of the Tea Fire. He realized it was headed toward his home and rushed back to pack a few clothes and important documents before evacuating.

Lima, a chef and caterer, lost all of his cooking equipment for his business in the blaze. To continue making a living, he needed to replace it.

He was one of 101 applicants for Tea Fire Recovery Fund money, which has been distributed to victims during the past year. Organizers held a news conference Monday to announce final results and the last disbursement of checks.

Donations totaled \$435,512 after interest and came from more than 500 donors. More than 90 percent of the applicants were renters, and many needed funds for work equipment such as tools. Funds also were allocated for temporary housing, clothing, furniture, school supplies, medical services and counseling services.

The fund's oversight committee and screening subcommittee analyzed applications and refused funds to only a few — those who had adequate insurance, said Louise Kolbert, CEO of the [American Red Cross, Santa Barbara Chapter](#).

The funds were distributed in five stages and also went toward victim outreach. "Literally, out of the ashes came good things," said G. Paul Didier, president and CEO of [United Way of Santa Barbara County](#).

Those who received financial assistance were rarely given cash; instead, the money was transferred directly to the supplier of their needs, such as landlords and local stores.

Lima picked up his requested cooking supplies directly after his application was approved. His involvement with the fund didn't end there, as he later catered the annual Red Cross Gala party and helped with fundraising. He was awarded a certificate of recognition by those involved in the community partnership at Monday's news conference at United Way.

About 80 percent of the donated funds came in during the first few weeks after the fire, which destroyed 230 properties and damaged many more in Santa Barbara and Montecito.

About 90 of the Santa Barbara property owners are in the review and rebuilding process, with 14 families back in their homes, [Mayor Marty Blum](#) said. "People poured in money," she said. "It shows our compassion and care around here."



Carlos Lima, a chef and caterer, lost his cooking equipment in the Tea Fire. He received assistance from the Tea Fire Recovery Fund, and later gave back through community service. He was awarded a certificate of recognition on Monday. (Giana Magnoli / Noozhawk photo)

[Westmont College](#) lost 14 homes in its Las Barrancas faculty housing during the Tea Fire, and 27 more were damaged. There was also damage to the campus itself. [Earlier this month, 12 faculty families moved into their new, rebuilt homes.](#)

[Montecito Fire Protection District](#) Chief Kevin Wallace and [Santa Barbara City Fire Department](#) Chief Andrew DiMizio attended Monday's event, and many praised the efforts of the first responders.

Firefighters, law enforcement and assisting outside agencies helped prevent a loss of life and minimized damage to structures, First District [Supervisor Salud Carbajal](#) said.

"We may help save lives and save homes, but these people, this fund is what helps rebuild lives," Wallace said.

DiMizio agreed. "Chronic cooperative efforts like this — those partnerships are what save communities," he said.

While grateful that no lives were lost, the community hasn't forgotten about those who were injured, DiMizio said. "We very much care about those with injuries, and our thoughts are with [Lance and Carla Hoffman](#)," he said.

When the fire broke out near their rented cottage on East Mountain Drive, the Hoffmans suffered second- and third-degree burns while running to their car to flee. They are still recovering from their injuries, but are back living in Santa Barbara.

Both fire chiefs said they remain concerned about the current streak of fires. "It's probably a matter of when it'll happen again," DiMizio said.

Each disaster is dealt with separately, and the Tea Fire Response Fund players are re-creating their roles to manage funds for Jesusita Fire victims. They expect to distribute monies in early 2010.

Most of the Tea Fire Recovery Fund applicants were renters, and many residents of the area had lower incomes than those in the area affected by the Jesusita Fire, committee members said.

They expect more of the Jesusita Fire victims to have insurance as well.

“People think of Santa Barbara and Montecito as super wealthy, but a lot of people affected by the Tea Fire were not,” Wallace said.

Many local organizations contributed time to the fund in the form of volunteer committee members. Organizations with representatives on the oversight committee or screening subcommittee are the [county](#) and [city of Santa Barbara](#), [Santa Barbara Bank & Trust](#), United Way, the [Santa Barbara Foundation](#), the Red Cross, [KEYT3](#); [KZSB AM 1290](#), [Catholic Charities](#), [ServiceMaster](#), the Santa Barbara City Fire Department and Office of Emergency Services, [First Southern Baptist Church](#), [Unity Shoppe](#), the county [Office of Emergency Services](#), MERRAG/Montecito Fire Department, [Direct Relief International](#), the [Wildland Residents Association](#) and the [Lions Club](#).

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