

Immigrant families seek help after fires

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Cristalyn Robles and her family hurried in the early hours of the firestorm last month, loading four clients into wheelchairs as wind-driven flames roared toward the Larkfield assisted living facility where the immigrant family lived and worked.

As embers rained down on the darkened street near Cardinal Newman High School, Robles, her mother, her husband, Charlie, and their 7-year-old son ran to safety, each pushing a wheelchair holding the residents in their care.

“My son was crying, ‘Mommy, Mommy, I can’t see.’ I told my son, ‘You have to be brave. You have to get Maria out of here,’” Robles, 40, said.

Her mother, Alicia Tanael, 65, waved down a pair of motorists passing by and loaded the clients into their vans.

“It was very fast. All that came to mind was to get our residents out,” Robles said, recounting their escape from the Tubbs fire that destroyed the assisted living facility on Ursuline Road, leaving the family jobless and without a home. Grateful relatives of those who the family saved have started a GoFundMe page to help with their recovery.

On Saturday, Robles and her family, who currently are sleeping in her brother’s living room, stopped by the Roseland Village Neighborhood Center on Sebastopol Road, where local organizations were providing financial assistance for undocumented families impacted by the Sonoma County wildfires. Dozens of families already were lined up when the doors opened at 10 a.m.

“The first people were here at eight o’clock,” said Christy Lubin, director of the Graton Day Labor Center, which created the UndocuFund for Fire Relief in partnership with the North Bay Organizing Project and North Bay Jobs with Justice.

Nearly \$2 million has been raised for the fire relief fund, Lubin said. The goal is to raise \$5 million to support thousands of undocumented residents impacted the fires. Unlike other local disaster victims, they are not eligible for assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

“There are people who lost everything — possessions, homes and jobs,” Lubin said. “Most of these people aren’t going anywhere else to get help.”

Lubin said 115 families applied for assistance Saturday. It was the first clinic they’ve held since creating the fund last month.

While some lost homes, Lubin said other families face financial struggles after losing their jobs or wages after their employers were burned out.

Currently, aid from the fund maxes out at \$3,000 per family, but amounts may increase depending on families' needs, Lubin said.

"Everything is on a caseby- case basis," she said, adding that most families will receive a check by the end of next week.

The UndocuFund received donations from all over the country, including from the California Endowment and Isabel Allende Foundation, she said. Lubin said 100 percent of the donations go directly to the fire victims.

To qualify for assistance, at least one member of the family must be undocumented, said Omar Medina, UndocuFund coordinator and a member of the North Bay Organizing Project.

During the event, Medina trained volunteers filling out applications for the families and asking about their specific needs. They also were providing information on other resources and giving out gift cards to those who lost homes.

Jenny, who has a special visa but did not want to use her last name for fear it would jeopardize her immigration status, was seeking assistance after losing two weeks of work. She spent a week living in her car with her two children, 8 and 15, after they were evacuated from their Rincon Valley apartment.

While they were eventually let back into their unit, Jenny, who is a single mom and cleans homes for a living, said there was no one to watch her kids when they were out of school for about three weeks.

"We should support each other," she said. "We all are humans and deserve assistance. Race or immigration (status) shouldn't matter."

Many families have been afraid to seek financial assistance elsewhere because of their immigration status and language barrier, said Daranee Petsod, president of the Sebastopol-based Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, which is overseeing the fund.

"We saw in the early days that folks were falling through the cracks. They weren't going to the shelters or to the evacuation centers," she said.

While mixed-status families may apply for some federal disaster relief using one of their U.S.-born children's Social Security numbers, some fear information they provide on the applications will be shared with immigration agents. Organizations like the Graton Day Labor Center and the North Bay Organizing Project are effective in reaching out to vulnerable immigrant populations because they've been working with them for years, Petsod said.

"There's trust," she said.

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UNDOCUFUND FOR FIRE RELIEF

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