



Far Northern Regional Center

Providing services and supports which allow persons with developmental disabilities to live productive and valued lives.

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JUNE 2008 HUMBOLDT-PARADISE FIRE SUMMARY

On Wednesday, June 11, 2008, fire broke out on Humboldt Road east of Chico, and north of Paradise. Over the course of the next three days, the fire initially burned rapidly south and east across several ridge lines below Paradise, fed by high north winds. On the third day, the winds shifted, and there was additional anticipation of fire heading east and north along the upper reaches of Butte Creek canyon, and on to Forest Ranch. The greatest concentration of homes and people affected were the southern reaches of Paradise and points east, and eventually the north and western regions of Paradise as well. (For more detailed descriptions of the course of events, please review the attached OES reports.)

There were several major complications to this particular fire event:

Paradise sits predominantly on a ridge, bounded by deep canyons on both long sides. At different times during the fire, there were fire lines in each of those canyons. The steepness of canyon walls contributed to the difficulty in combating the fire.

There are 4 major routes from the valley up the ridge to Paradise. At first two, then three of those routes were closed as the fire overtook them. The fourth route was eventually closed to all inbound traffic, and the outbound pouring of people trying to get off the ridge blocked that route for hours. At the height of the fire, people were attempting to leave the area by going further into the mountains and traveling on dirt and logging roads (there is no paved exit to the east/north). To attempt to deal with this, officials asked evacuees to assemble at collection points, and buses were used to transport down to the valley.

Paradise is a community with a significant number of retired, elderly or disabled residents. There are a large number of RCFE's, SNF's, and assisted living facilities. FNRC has 19 residential care facilities of one type or another on the ridge. Seventeen of those were in the evacuation areas. Four are homes with severely medically fragile persons. All of this presents particular challenges for evacuation, especially off the ridge.

With its physical isolation, Paradise quickly ran out of fuel and groceries. Cell phones did not work well, if at all. And during the fire, the power went out through much of the town. Information was variable – as it is with any major event.

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FNRC Activities

By mid afternoon on Thursday, June 12, we were able to forward to the evacuation agencies both a list and a map feature identifying all status 13 and 14 consumers in the three evacuation "zones". Lists included names, addresses, phone numbers. We sent also a list of consumers who use specialized medical equipment within the first evacuation zone, which was what was happening at that time.

We then began telephoning all status 13/14 consumer to encourage them to listen to the police when they were told to evacuate, and where to go to one of the collection centers for transport off the ridge to the Red Cross shelter in Chico. We had some initial success reaching folks, but as the afternoon progressed, most phones did not connect, or no one answered. We also called all residential care facilities, inquiring about their evacuation plans, and attempted to reach families (with little success).

One major complication for the regional center was that many of our consumers living in Paradise work or attend day programs in Chico, and were caught in the valley when the roads began to close. At one point on Thursday, we had 44 consumers on one of 6 vans/buses sitting on one or another of the possible routes into Paradise as the roads were closing. None of those consumers live within the evacuation areas, but were affected nonetheless by not being able to get home. Several of those people were redirected back to Chico to the Red Cross shelter.

When we received word that FNRC consumers would be arriving at the shelter Thursday evening without staff or any possessions (mostly those folks who couldn't get home), several of our staff and supervisors went to the shelter to offer assistance. FNRC provided medication lists, and rosters, and negotiated with a local pharmacy to provide a short supply of meds.

When our consumers arrived at the shelter, we were notified that the shelter was approaching capacity (which at that point was 70 beds). It appeared to our staff that the Red Cross did not have any clear plans what to do with the overflow. FNRC supervisors demonstrated initiative in locating a community church, and soliciting donations of bedding, toiletries, and foodstuffs for our consumers. We contacted a local vendor to provide personal assistance and supervision for consumers who were without supports. We essentially opened our own shelter on Thursday.

On Friday, June 13, as the winds changed, the fire turned more toward Paradise. At the same time, fire on one of the ridges to the north of the town became more aggressive. It was at this point that the regional center began a concerted effort to identify shelter space for the 24 medically fragile consumers still on the ridge, and for 60 adults with severe behavior challenges that reside in numerous locations throughout Paradise (served by one vendor).

We secured the use of one of our day program sites in Chico, equipped with hoier lifts, roll in showers, and changing tables. And we received word that Sierra Vista, in Yuba

City had already done a drill to prep for us, and had space and support for all 60 of our challenged folks and 40 of their staff.

By mid afternoon on Friday, DDS arrived at our office in Chico, and was making connections through OES for specialized equipment and supplies for the medically fragile folks. By that point, Red Cross had opened two more shelters in Chico, and had converted two of their evacuation centers in Paradise into shelters. As best we could tell, we had consumers in one of the shelters in each community, and were prepared with the specialized spaces if need be.

Somewhere around 5pm on Friday, we received information that one of the traffic routes into Paradise was again open, and people were being allowed to return home. As we would learn, shelters remained open one more night, although people who lost their homes have had ongoing shelter.

No FNRC consumer was injured or harmed during the fires. Two consumer families lost their homes. While many FNRC staff were either unable to get home for the duration, or were evacuated out, no one lost their home. Our director lost several outbuildings on her property, but the house was spared. Several staff working for one of our vendors lost their homes.

What We Learned

Communication is critical. Information was variable, and sometimes downright sketchy. We were sometimes making decisions based on not enough information. Communication with each other is also vital.

Having a single leader, and some kind of hierarchy with task assignment would reduce some of our internal confusion, and would reduce the duplication of efforts.

We really need the reverse 911 system. It would save a lot of phone calling.

We need cell phone numbers for all residential facilities – after home began to evacuate, we could no longer reach them to assure they found safety.

Consumers' emergency contacts need to be people outside the affected area – as many of our folks evacuated, so were their emergency contacts evacuating.

Transporting large numbers of medically fragile people presents serious risks. We learned after the fire that there were ambulance and nonemergency medical transport companies on alert on the ridge.

Transporting large numbers of behaviorally challenged folks would also present a challenge. The vendor in this case has van vehicles at each residence. We also discovered that one of our large day programs in Paradise houses numerous vehicles onsite, which could be available.

We need to explore the possibility of sheltering consumers in place at their day program sites, should they be caught onsite during an event. During this fire, some consumers were sitting in vehicles for hours before being turned away at roadblocks, and sent to shelters.

In spite of our expectation that our consumers be included in all aspects of community, including their care during an emergency, it is unrealistic to assume that shelters can meet all of the varied needs of some of our consumers. We will develop a cache of specialized supports (ie raised cots, screens for changing privacy, diapers) to make available to shelters for the use of our folks. We also will provide personal care assistance (vendored), and even specialized shelter locations if need be.

We are installing basic cable in each major office, to allow us to follow news updates. We did use radios, and computers to track the news, but think it would be good to have one more source.

We will be asking our residential providers to prepare two disaster preparedness plans – one for a local emergency which would allow them to stay in the area, and one for evacuation out of the area.

We need to update all consumer addresses and contact information in Sandis.