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The warnings arrived on Friday, October 19, 2007; the holocaust arrived two days later, on Sunday, October 21, 2007 when the Harris, Witch Creek and McCoy fires erupted with a vengeance. Within days, the fires became familiar as constant images and sounds of the Harris, Rice Canyon, Poomacha, Horno, Guejito and Witch Creek fires inundated our televisions and radios. The next few weeks became our darkest and finest hours. Many San Diego psychologists contributed to these days becoming a beacon of hope for all of us affected by the fires. Are we ready for the next disaster?

### **The most destructive fire day in San Diego's history**

The morning of October 22, 2007, 365 homes burned in Rancho Bernardo. The San Diego Fire Department had two strike teams helping Cal Fire fight the Harris fire near the U.S.-Mexico border. Three strike teams, consisting of 5 engines and 20 firefighters were stationed at strategic points. As the fires progressed, ten additional strike teams were requested from outside agencies, but there were none available.

### **The fire's impact on us**

By the second day, most schools were closed; and children coped without their normal support systems provided by teachers and other students. Palomar Hospital evacuated all of their patients as the flames approached. Tens of thousands of residents were without power. People who lost their homes and possessions in the 2003 Cedar fires were facing the prospect of experiencing the same losses in 2007. Imagine the impact on your total sense of being safe in the world. The fires, with their ever changing direction caused a feeling of uncertainty for all citizens.

As new fires appeared, some were quickly put out, but at least 5 fires caused significant problems for responders and others coping with them. Over 500,000 evacuees tried to adjust to shelter life and cope with the uncertainty of what their futures held. Those not directly affected by the fires, took in friends and relatives and sometimes provided relief and acts of kindness to strangers. Sometimes evacuees were told they needed to head for evacuation centers in safer locations as the fires constantly changed directions. Anxiety and fear was palpable wherever groups of people were assembled. We tried to reassure friends and relatives in other states that we were safe; that we would survive.

### **The terrible price**

The most tragic loss in the fires was the death of at least fourteen people. There may be more, as yet undiscovered, in the back country, overtaken by quick moving flames.

Economic losses were tremendous. Just the expense of firefighting efforts and clean up was estimated at over one billion. That does not address the loss of homes and property. Growers involved in agriculture witnessed 8,600 acres of

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crops destroyed at a loss of more than \$42.6 million; a double whammy after years of drought. At least 2300 vehicles were lost in the fires. Imagine suddenly losing home and possessions along with your transportation.

### **Heroic efforts of emergency responders**

San Diego's Fire-Rescue Department with the assistance of police officers stopped the spread of the fire at two strategic points in Rancho Bernardo, preventing an even worse disaster in that area. As time passed, the Guejito and Witch fires merged, and firefighters in the midst of chaos as 60 to 70 mile an hour winds carried the fire west of Interstate 15, were forced to make tough decisions. Where should they concentrate their efforts? Which neighborhoods and houses had a chance of surviving the flames? Can you imagine the psychological impact on fire officials making those decisions? At all times, the primary consideration had to be the safety of residents and responding personnel.

At one point, a team of firefighters made a stand at an apartment complex that had 57 three-story buildings with 12 to 14 apartments. When the fire fighters arrived, two apartments in one building were burning, but within minutes seven other buildings began to burn. Normally a fire of this magnitude would require a force of 25 to 30 engines with at least 100 firefighters. But there was no one to respond to assist the five engines and 20 firefighters. Working beyond exhaustion, they were able to save 49 of the buildings, losing just eight of the buildings. Of course, the residents of the destroyed apartments found no cause for joy at this victory for the firefighters.

Several firefighters were injured; some while trying to rescue people who ignored evacuation orders in an attempt to save their homes; often losing their homes in the end and sometimes their lives. Firefighter Andrew Pikop, from Northern California, almost lost his life in a rescue attempt. He needed to be rescued by helicopter. He said from the burn unit, "I thought about how much this was going to hurt – burning to death. I was absolutely sure I was gonna die."

Death by fire is horrific to imagine. I was faced with the prospect of dying when I worked patrol as a San Diego Police officer; people pulling weapons and others high on phencyclidine (angel dust). Although the outcome could have been life or death, I did not face the frightening possibility of being consumed by an out of control fire. That image makes me shudder.

Fire, police and other first responders were also victims of the same fires the rest of us were facing. Many of them lost their homes in the early hours of the fires and yet continued to fight to save the lives and homes of others. Can you imagine facing these dangers while knowing your loved ones had been displaced and your home destroyed? How well would you be able to function under these circumstances? And yet, many stories came out of the fires about firefighters

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and police officers removing and saving pictures and irreplaceable possessions when they realized the battle to save the dwelling was lost.

### **Reverse 911 and other life savers**

For the first time ever, City of San Diego residents could receive emergency alerts like evacuation notices from the city's Reverse 911 system. Residents had to provide their cell phone numbers, addresses and emails. Unlike the fires in 2003, with this new technology, many received the evacuation notices by the Reverse 911 process. To use this and other innovations takes preparation and planning. San Diego residents can voluntarily add cell or pager numbers to the city's Reverse 911 database at this website:

<http://www.sandiego.gov/ohs/reverse911/index.shtml>

### **Mental health assistance**

In addition to the San Diego Psychological Association, other organizations such as the Access and Crisis Line, Mental Health of America and the National Alliance on Mental Health offered services to those affected by the fires. The Community Health Improvement Partners web site provided an online directory for mental health services. Many San Diego county psychologists provided services and offered other assistance. Most worked as volunteers with the San Diego/Imperial County Chapter of the American Red Cross. Some assisted with making call-downs or working in the command center. Others worked in the many shelters scattered throughout the county. These volunteer psychologists and other licensed mental health professionals worked even though they were often forced to evacuate from their own residences.

### **Why American Red Cross?**

In disasters federal, state and county mandates require those interested in disaster response meet certain criteria. In other words, you cannot just show up at a disaster and volunteer. This is called self deployment. Federal law mandates the American Red Cross is the primary provider of disaster response in shelter operations. The American Red Cross has signed memorandums of understanding with local governments and deploys to disaster scenes at the request of the police or fire Incident Commander in charge of the disaster. Red Cross volunteers then respond to provide the requested assistance. Another important reason for working under American Red Cross is because of liability issues. Unless we respond in an unethical or negligent manner we come under the Red Cross umbrella.

If the Incident Commander is in the process of ordering an evacuation, the Red Cross opens a shelter, ideally before the evacuation order is executed. When that happens, Red Cross volunteers can get an evacuation center up and running before residents begin to arrive. Long before a disaster strikes, the American Red Cross volunteers have already visited facilities in the region to determine their suitability for use in as an evacuation site and signed

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memorandums of understanding with the facility managers. The American Red Cross has the expertise in running shelters. Other organizations may provide meals or baby sitting assistance.

### **American Red Cross requirements for Disaster Mental Health**

All American Red Cross volunteers are required to take two short courses; "New Employee or Volunteer Orientation" (NEVO) and "Fulfilling Our Mission" initially. These are quick overviews of the American Red Cross mission and values. Being licensed as a mental health provider (psychologist, social worker or marriage family therapist) is required to provide services through the Disaster Mental Health committee.

The specific course for mental health professionals in disaster response is "Foundations of Disaster Mental Health", an 8 hour course. This course is usually offered two times a year. We are working to have it offered soon, ideally before fire season heats up. The first two courses are offered several times during the month and listed on the website: [www.sdarc.org](http://www.sdarc.org) or call the American Red Cross at 858-309-1200 to register.

Since I took that course in January, I decided to become cross-trained by taking additional coursework. I felt it was important to see the whole picture, even though I will most likely serve only in the mental health field. I wanted to be eligible for deployment during large disasters in other locations.

### **Being on call in Disaster Mental Health (DMH)**

Many psychologists serve exclusively in disaster mental health. Part of their commitment, in addition to disaster response, is to be on call two weeks a year; one time as a primary on call person and another as a secondary back-up on call person. Sometimes your week passes with no calls; although that was not the case during October 2003 or 2007! Red Cross Disaster Action Teams respond to house fires and request assistance from DMH on call volunteers when there is a fatality or mental health services are needed.

### **How can we, as psychologists, assist during disasters?**

We are in the process of revitalizing the Disaster Response Committee. I am receiving information, resources and support from past chairs, committee members and our Disaster Response Network State Co-coordinator, Dr. Denruth Lougeay. The goal is to have the San Diego Psychological Association's disaster response timely and most importantly within appropriate response protocol.

Many psychologists realize their schedules are packed, but would like to assist during major disasters. Unfortunately, we must be prepared to provide an effective disaster response. Most disaster preparedness occurs prior to the incident. Aside from attendance at training, we will do most of the preparation planning by phone conferences and emails.

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As a police officer, I wasn't prepared to respond to a major disaster when I was assigned to the morgue at the St. Augustine gym after the PSA crash in North Park. On September 25th, 1978, San Diego was the scene of the worst air disaster, to date, in the United States. A mid-air collision between a Cessna 172 and a Pacific Southwest Airlines (PSA) Boeing 727 caused both planes to crash into the neighborhood below. A total of 144 lives were lost. Working with homicide detectives, in that make-shift morgue, changed the way I experienced death and the fickleness with which it could arrive. At that time we did not receive counseling, debriefing or psychological support. We were assigned to work shifts of 12 on-duty and 12 hours off-duty.

### **A note to students interested in disaster response**

Although American Red Cross requires licensure as a mental health professional to provide services in Disaster Mental Health, we welcome students on the San Diego Psychological Association Disaster Response committee - there is much to learn and prepare for and we need your help. We will offer trainings and you will be invited to all of those. I suggest you volunteer with American Red Cross and learn about various disaster response functions.

### **Are you ready? Three steps to take**

For the past 11 years, I have assisted businesses and schools with disaster preparedness plans and disaster exercises. I find most companies, schools and individuals are either not prepared or *under prepared*.

So how can you be prepared for disasters? The American Red Cross recommends three steps:

1. Get a kit – minimum of three days of supplies in an easy to carry kit
2. Make a plan including 2 escape routes per room; 2 family meeting points
3. Be informed – learn CPR and first aid; keep training current

As psychologists, we gravitate towards helping others in times of need, so let's work together to be sure we have our personal disaster plans in place. Without that, you will be unable to assist others. With your personal plan in place, if you would like to reach out to the community when disaster strikes, get prepared by taking the necessary classes and know you are invited to join the Disaster Response committee.