

Wildfires take toll on L.A. carriers

Wildfires in a populated area are sure to wreak havoc, and that's what Los Angeles experienced in January. The fires killed at least 29 people, destroyed thousands of homes and businesses, and left many people homeless, making the fires among the most destructive in California's history.

No reports of deaths or injuries among postal employees were reported, but nearly a dozen letter carriers lost their homes to the fires.

NALC President Brian L. Renfroe pledged the union's support for the affected carriers and praised them for their perseverance.

"NALC continues to stand with our members affected by the wildfires in the Los Angeles area," he said. "Letter carriers are more than just deliverers of mail. We are an essential part of our communities. In times of crisis, we step up for the people we serve and for each other. Many of our members

have adjusted rapidly to ensure the safe delivery of mail and service to our communities. These members exemplify the standard of service we proudly provide."

Some carriers have also been displaced from their work sites as the fires affected their routes and facilities. The fires were located mainly in three postal districts and caused the closure of six post offices, though two reopened soon after. The Altadena post office burned down, with operations transferred to Pasadena.

After a month of fires fed by high winds, Los Angeles breathed a sigh of relief when the winds died down and rain replaced them in late January, giving a much-needed helping hand to firefighters from California and eight other states, plus Canada and Mexico struggling to fight them. The fires were contained by February.

The La Niña weather pattern this winter caused very dry conditions, with hardly a trace of rainfall in the Los Angeles area since last May. Combined with the high-powered Santa Ana winds that blow each winter from the mountains, the drought created conditions for fires to spread and consume huge swaths of land.

As the smoke cleared and affected letter carriers settled into new homes, Los Angeles Branch 24 President and NALC Board of Trustees Chairman Larry Brown said the attitude in the city is positive.

"It's been traumatic, as you can imagine, very emotional," he said. "The way that the city has come together, man—just outstanding. We will rebuild;





The Palisades Fire

Photo by Toastt21

we will come back. That’s the attitude and it’s ongoing.”

While the fires are over, new challenges remain. Residents must rebuild their lives after some 16,000 homes and businesses were destroyed and many others damaged. Some estimates put the damages at \$250 billion or more. While the rain has helped to control the fires, mudslides and runoff from toxic ash have made many areas unsafe. The process of sorting through and cleaning toxic and hazardous materials from the ruins—the waste from burned paint, rubber, pesticides, batteries, compressed gas cylinders and other items found in homes, cars and shops—could take months. Some of the poisonous ash already is leaking onto beaches and into waterways.

Before the fires were out, the NALC Disaster Relief Foundation (DRF) responded with immediate assistance to letter carriers who had been affected, contacting the carriers or responding to requests for help and providing quick assistance.

“We are assisting 11 carriers who lost their homes and possessions in the fires,” DRF President Christina Vela Davidson said. “DRF responded by finding these carriers and providing immediate help, while offering more long-term assistance down the road as they recover.”

‘Nothing standing but the fireplace’

Thomas Carter went to work on Tuesday, Jan. 7, delivering a route in Pasadena as he has since 1986. The Pasadena Branch 2200 member could see smoke and flames from distant fires, but they didn’t appear to pose a threat to his home in Altadena, a few miles north.

On his way home that evening, Carter got a call from a co-worker asking if he and his family were OK. “I wonder what he’s talking about,” he thought at the time. “Are we OK?”

That’s how Carter learned that the Eaton Fire had started very close to his neighborhood, with flames close to his home and high winds spreading the fire fast.

He still wasn’t worried because he was used to wildfires in Los Angeles, but when his wife called to tell him she and their adult children were packing up to evacuate, he knew there was a serious threat. On the way to his house, he saw emergency vehicles heading in the same direction. Then he saw a bulldozer, which is sometimes used to fight fires in urban areas by pushing cars out of the way of advancing fire trucks.

“When I saw the bulldozer, I’m thinking, ‘This is real serious,’” Carter recalled. Navigating streets with broken traffic lights, he reached a point where he could see the fire.

Wildfires take toll on L.A. carriers (continued)

“I could see the blaze, the brightness, and I knew it was there,” he continued. “This was different, because normally in Altadena, when we’ve had fire warnings, they were more along the ridge of the foothills, and they were up higher. But this, you could tell, was within the neighborhood. So, as I got up to the house, I could tell it was only a few blocks away.”

After reaching his home, Carter and his family were at the mercy of the wind. “The wind had died down a little bit and that was a break for us. It would pick up every now and then. As a matter of fact, [at] one point it picked up and you could see it pushing the fire back up the hill. You could tell the smoke was going the opposite direction, which we hoped would happen. But it changed again.”

With three vehicles available and a little extra time, Carter and his family

loaded some valuables and left. His son alerted neighbors to the threat.

“We would get as much as we could, which, thank God, we were able to get a lot out,” Carter said. “You know, some clothes, pictures and important things, of course, papers.”

“Some people didn’t have that time,” he said.

With many other people evacuating, the family struggled to find a hotel with any rooms available, but eventually found one.

The next morning, a neighbor who had gone back to the area reported the damage on social media. “So, we knew early on Wednesday that our block was gone,” Carter said.

It took a few weeks for firefighters to contain the blaze and for authorities to clear the area for hazards like live electrical wires before Carter could view the damage in person. Along with most of the houses in his neighborhood, his home was destroyed, Carter said: “Nothing standing but the fireplace.”

A Branch 2200 steward contacted Carter shortly after the disaster to connect him with the NALC Disaster Relief Foundation. He applied for immediate assistance in the form of a grant, and it arrived within a few days. “It actually was very quick, very smooth and great help,” he said. By early February, with the help of their home insurance, the Carters found a new home to lease and left the hotel.

Branch 24 President Brown said that carriers are getting help from many sources, and that USPS worked to support carriers who were evacuated, even temporarily. “The Postal Service worked with us, our branch, for those who couldn’t get to their homes because certain areas were restricted,” he said. “They couldn’t even get in



One of the many houses destroyed in the wildfires that raged across Los Angeles

their homes to get their uniforms to go to work.”

Brown also is chairman of the Los Angeles AFL-CIO’s Labor Community Services, which is pitching in to help affected union members with housing costs. And, to help smaller branches in the region, Branch 24 donated \$20,000 to the Disaster Relief Foundation.

How you can help

You can help your fellow carriers in need by donating to the Disaster Relief Foundation right now.

The foundation identifies carriers who are affected by disasters and disseminates aid as soon as possible. The aid can include emergency grants or supplies such as water, food, clothing and postal uniform items. Working closely with local branch leaders, DRF also helps NALC members whose homes are uninhabitable by offering emergency grants so a member might be able to find temporary housing or transportation, as well as helping them apply for additional grant funds once the weather clears and they are able to assess their damage.

Grants are provided for property damage sustained to a primary residence, automobile or personal property from causes such as, but not limited to, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, earthquakes or severe storms, along with wildfires, and are provided only to NALC members.

Members do not have to wait for emergency relief or insurance claims to be settled to apply. Applications must be received within 120 days from the date of the natural disaster, unless the applicant can provide sufficient reasons for a delay. The application for a relief grant is on the foundation’s website, nalc.org/disaster.

The foundation relies on donations from NALC members.

“Our donors make our work possible,” Davidson said. “It’s gratifying to know that you can help a fellow letter carrier in need, and that if you need help someday, DRF will be there for you.”

Every penny of donations to DRF go directly to individual carriers or branches needing assistance—no administrative costs are deducted.

“Your donations are helping NALC members in the path of the wildfires who receive assistance to get back on their feet quickly,” Renfroe said. “Please give to DRF to help them get through this crisis.”

Donations can be sent to: NALC Disaster Relief Foundation, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144; or made by credit card at nalc.org/ndrfdonate. The foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization; contributions to DRF may be tax-deductible. It is recommended that you consult your tax advisor.

“The way the storms keep rolling in,” Davidson added, “you never know when it might be you or someone you love who may need help, so give a little or a lot. It’s for your brothers and sisters, and it’s for a great cause.” **PR**

Help letter carriers hit hard by wildfires



NALC Disaster Relief Foundation

Make a donation by sending a check or money order to NALC Disaster Relief Foundation, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144 or by going to nalc.org/disaster.