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Locals collect essentials for fire victims who may have lost everything

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Cardboard boxes and bulging garbage bags were stacked three deep in Casino Fandango's foyer Tuesday as staff members packed clothing, toiletries and other donations for delivery to the victims of the Angora Fire south of Lake Tahoe.

"We've had quite a few people come out," said Beth Brower, finance director for the casino. "Hopefully, we'll be able to get a load out to (the shelter at) Rufus Allen Recreational Center tonight."

Organizers estimated that about 30 donors had stopped by in the past two days. Gifts ranged from canned food to heavy coats, marketing director Samuel Arellano said. The casino was also accepting cash donations to the relief effort.

"I'd say we have a couple hundred pounds of items," he said. "One of our employees started sort of an in-house competition about (which worker) could donate the most, so a lot of us are helping out. We're also taking cash and credit card (donations) at the cashier's cage."

Like many other businesses and groups across the region, Casino Fandango was looking for a way to help those displaced by the historic blaze. With early figures indicating hundreds of structures damaged and more than 1,000 people displaced since the fire started on Sunday, volunteers seemed to have their work cut out for them.

Group reorganizes

Tahoe-area business owner Jana Ney Walker, who in 2001 organized a \$50,000 donation drive for victims of the World Trade Center attacks, said she revived Tahoe Businesses Who Care this week after she learned the Angora Fire had left one of her employees homeless. This time, she and other merchants have teamed with the Tahoe Douglas Rotary Club to aid displaced South Shore residents. The initial effort was scheduled to last



Smoke rises, above, from the remains of a home near Lake Tahoe Boulevard in the South Lake Tahoe area. During a community meeting at South Lake Tahoe Middle School on Monday evening, above right, Shari Mann, of South Lake Tahoe, chokes up when organizers talk of the loss of homes in the Angora Fire. Mann's home did not burn down. (DAVID B. PARKER/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL)

through Saturday but could be extended.

"Just like after 9/11, people want to help but they aren't sure how," Walker said. "I didn't see any reason to reinvent the wheel, so we're doing pretty much the same thing again."

As before, member businesses including Rock Your World gem shop and Paradise Real Estate will either forward a percentage of their proceeds or make in-kind donations to the relief effort. Each will display a logo advertising the program, which makes it easy for casual shoppers to recognize the stores.

"This way, if you want to go have a cup of coffee or buy a sweater, you can also help out," Walker said. "My experience has always been that the most successful people tend to be the ones who also give the most back."

A place for seniors

Meanwhile, Sierra Place Retirement and Assisted Living Community in Carson City moved to deal with the immediate needs of displaced seniors. The facility announced Monday that it would offer a week's worth of free housing, food, medicine and other aid to displaced residents 65 and older. One person has already taken advantage of the offer, executive director Gregory Klick said.

"It came to me while I was driving to work this morning," he said. "People will need someplace to stay away from the smoke ... and the hotels will probably be getting full."

As the Waterfall Fire licked at the edges of Carson City in 2004, Sierra Place residents were forced to evacuate twice, Klick said. That experience left Klick and his staff acutely aware of the needs of fire victims, he said.

"I remember it very well," he said. "Now, for us to house or feed a senior from nearby who has special needs seems like the least we could do."

Many churches have also opened their doors to donors. In Minden, members of Carson Valley Christian Center have seen an outpouring of support, administrative assistant Liz Smith said.

"Our lobby's just about full," she said. "Last night, someone dropped off a whole truckload of energy drinks. Before that, we had a couple come in on their anniversary. They decided to take the money they were going to spend on presents and give it to people who lost their homes. We thought that was really neat."

Emergency personnel, usually the first group to move on behalf of disaster victims, continued to work in a variety of ways even as the fire seemed to be weakening.

"It's hard to describe what people go through when they realize they've lost their house," said Carson City Fire Chief Stacey Giomi. "One minute you have everything, the next it's completely gone. Your heart just aches."

Resources scarce

One of the biggest challenges public safety personnel face during large-scale emergencies is that of coverage. Paramedics and firefighters committed to the Angora Fire are unable to deal with the less serious accidents and medical problems that would normally take up a good portion of their time.

For that reason, Carson City Fire Department and many other agencies sent what resources they could spare to the South Lake Tahoe area this week, both to battle the main fire and to handle other incidents. At various stages, CCFD deployed a fire engine, an ambulance and a command officer, Giomi said.

"In many ways, this is very comparable to the Waterfall Fire," he said. "Many of the same emotions and

situations are involved, and you have (responders) coming in from all over. Of course, this fire is much, much worse."

Back at the lake, members of the Nevada Fire Safe Council, a statewide group dedicated to helping residents protect their homes from wildland fire, joined firefighters in sifting through the ashes. The group could "only hope" to learn some lessons from the disaster, executive director Andrew List said.

"Our goal is always to raise awareness, but not this way," he said. "I'm sad to say some of our members lost their homes. At this point, investigators are just helping us understand why some houses burned and others didn't. Hopefully we can come away with some idea of which steps are best to prevent this sort of thing."

List expressed hope that the blaze would serve to make all citizens more vigilant.

"The fact is, we do live in a fire-prone area," he said. "It's never a question of if there will be a fire, it's a question of when."

Giomi echoed the sentiment.

"People need to think about living in these areas the way people think about living in Tornado Alley," he said. "It's a desirous place to live, but there is only so much (authorities) can do to protect homes in the middle of a dry forest. The conditions are such that just because the area is burning right now doesn't mean it can't happen again next week."