

# Oakhurst, North Fork wildfire evacuees find sense of community during disasters

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While hundreds of firefighters continue to battle two wildfires raging in North Fork and above Oakhurst on Saturday, those evacuated from the blazes are taking solace in the support offered by the local communities and the American Red Cross.

Cindee Aydelott sat at a table in the lobby of the Sierra Vista Presbyterian Church in Oakhurst and filled out paperwork from the American Red Cross of Central California. She answered a few questions asked by the Red Cross volunteer before she and her two daughters, Katreena, 6, and Jaymee, 15, are shown to three of the 80 or so cots set up for evacuees.

“I had a feeling this was coming,” Aydelott said. “The fire kept me up last night. The sky was bright orange, and billows of smoke were coming off the mountain.”

“The smoke was so bad that I couldn’t see my neighbor’s house.”

Aydelott and her daughters are just some of the North Fork area residents evacuated in the Corrine fire, which swelled to as many as 1,000 acres Friday night. At 7 a.m. Sunday, Cal Fire reported that the fire was burning 920 acres and was 35% contained. More than 1,400 fire personnel were battling the blaze.

The cause is still undetermined.

Some residents will be allowed to return home Saturday night.

As of 6 p.m., mandatory evacuations for homes on Road 225 between Lark Lane and Mammoth roads were reduced to advisory status, Cal Fire said. The same is true for those living on Road 225 between Road 235 and Tunobi Place.

Mandatory evacuations along Road 222 were still in effect.

Aydelott said she packed up her car Friday night once she noticed the bright sky and smoke. She grabbed clothing for herself and her daughters, filled an ice chest with food and drinks and grabbed her mother’s TV.

A sheriff’s deputy knocked on her door Saturday morning and told the family to evacuate. That’s when she headed to the shelter.

She said that the harsh wildfire evacuation is a new experience for her, despite living in the area her entire life.

We’ve never been evacuated. This is all new to me.

Cindee Aydelott

“The plan right now is to shower, eat and maybe stay the night,” she said. “My mother called from Quincy to make sure we were all right and to make sure her home in Coarsegold isn’t going to burn.”

Showering at the shelter, which has been open since Thursday night, has been a tricky proposition. The church’s hot water heater was broken the first two days, and even after it was fixed, it only powers one shower.

Executive director Barry Falke said that the Red Cross is planning on using showers at nearby Yosemite High School

as a stopgap solution.

The Aydelotts are sharing living arrangement with about 70 people evacuated from Calvin Crest camp. These are mostly college-aged summer counselors, as well as a few permanent staff members and their families.

Calvin Crest marketing and finance director Bill Ekhardt spent part of Saturday afternoon kicking a soccer ball around with his family in front of Sierra Vista church.

“We’re doing really well,” he said. “The whole town is pouring down support for us.”

Ekhardt said that 25 Sierra Vista parishioners offered to open up their homes and allow his staff members and their families to shower there. The counselors, all of whom have been at the shelter since Thursday with no hot water, were in the process of visiting these homes Saturday afternoon.

The staff was among the first group of evacuees pouring in from the Sky fire, which sparked Thursday afternoon when a truck pulled off to the east side of Road 632 and ignited the nearby brush.

The fire was estimated at around 600 acres Friday night. It was holding steady at a revised 500 acres by 8 a.m. Sunday, and around 690 firefighters have contained roughly 40% of the blaze.

The ordeal has proved to be an invaluable bonding experience for the 55 Calvin Crest summer counselors, all of whom are from different corners of the country. They had not met until June 13.

“We were all just thrown together into this very real situation,” Ekhardt said. “This is a really organic way for us to bond as a staff. We are becoming one entity.”

Ekhardt said the camp is “at the mercy of the Forest Service” right now. Camp was supposed to begin Sunday, but the fire has pushed this back to a soft opening date of Wednesday.

The staff isn’t sure how much, if any, cleaning will be required once the evacuation order is lifted. Ekhardt wasn’t sure if the camp has been hit by any fire retardant, which has been dropped on both fires by aircraft for several days now.

Donate to relief efforts at [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org).

Meanwhile, a small town has sprung up at Minarets High School to support the massive number of firefighters battling the Corrine fire.

A dozen or so trailers fill the main parking lot, and several Cal Fire mobile food trucks were set up to feed the firefighting army. Tents dotted the school’s lawn, and trucks from all over California filled virtually every parking stall.

On the southern tip of Minarets High, around 50 members of the California Conservation Corps were setting up their own tents and eating from sack lunches. They are there to help with the cleanup, a Cal Fire firefighter said.

Elsewhere, the local Red Cross is preparing for more evacuees. With Sierra Vista starting to fill up, organizers set up a second shelter Friday night at the Oakhurst EV Free Church at 50443 School Road.

Spokeswoman Jessica Piffero said that 65 people spent Friday night at Sierra Vista, while 24 stayed at Oakhurst EV. Many more evacuees stopped by the churches for meals or information without spending the night.

The Central California Animal Disaster Team is also on site at both shelters to provide lodging, food, water and comfort for domestic pets. Larger animals can also be accommodated.

Although Aydelott and her two daughters aren’t thrilled to be at one of these evacuation shelters, she said the fires haven’t soured her outlook on living in a small mountain community.

“No way,” she said. “Look at the result: The entire community has pulled together.”

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