

RN Response Network volunteers met overwhelming community support during the Southern California wildfires, but government response to natural disasters was weakened by budget cuts and diversion of resources for war. BY ERIKA LARSON

Trial by FIRE

WHEN STRONG WINDS TURNED A SIMPLE BRUSHFIRE INTO A DISASTER IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY, COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND OTHER VOLUNTEERS

were more than ready to step up to the plate. As the fire spread, and more fires in other vulnerable areas of Southern California developed, it became apparent that this situation would be a proving ground for CNA/NNOC's recently-formed Registered Nurse Response Network. Reaching out to volunteer RNs through phone calls and emails, RNRN staff worked to assemble volunteer RNs to work shifts at area shelters for those who had been forced to flee their homes.

RNRN was launched by CNA/NNOC in the aftermath of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster, and sent more than 300 volunteer RNs to aid understaffed and overworked colleagues in the Gulf Coast. Since then, RNRN has recruited more than 4,300 RNs nationwide who have agreed to volunteer in the event of an emergency or natural disaster.

Many in Southern California were able and willing to volunteer. Two RNs who heeded the call were Christina Talley and Deborah Morgan. Talley and Morgan, sisters who both work in Hemet Valley Hospital's emergency room, are old hands when it comes to disaster relief. Twelve years ago, after the Northridge earthquake, they set up a makeshift emergency room in their family motor home near Northridge Hospital, and volunteered during the Cedar firestorm four

years ago. In 2005, the sisters lent their expertise to the nascent RNRN program, traveling to New Orleans and eventually setting up their own makeshift clinic in a shipping container in City Park.

For Talley, the motivating force behind volunteering in times like these is to address the issues behind sensationalist headlines. "We are concerned that patient needs continue to be evaluated once the cameras go away and the news disappears from the front pages," she said.

In addition to seasoned volunteers, RNRN's call for help also brought new recruits to the disaster-relief effort. Jemalene Cortes, RN is a CNA/NNOC member working at St. Bernardine Medical Center. Although she had never volunteered with RNRN before, "I felt like I needed to do something. I couldn't just sit there."

Cortes went to a church-turned-shelter in San Diego County where, echoing the sentiments of many RNRN volunteers in Southern California, she says things ran very smoothly. "I was expecting the worst, but it was not chaotic at all," she explained, adding that the shelter had distinct areas for sleeping, food distribution, and first aid. Cortes worked alongside three other nurses, three doctors, two





EMTs, and two pharmacists to attend to the medical needs of evacuees and volunteers who were assisting with relief efforts.

Fran DeFurio, RN, a CNA/NNOC member from Long Beach Memorial Medical Center, worked at the same shelter as Cortes. “A lot of people were evacuated safely, but did not have the chance to grab their medications,” she described as a typical problem. For example, one diabetic woman was able to bring her insulin with her, but did not have a glucometer. “She would come to us every so often to have her blood sugar measured,” explained DeFurio. Evacuees who had become separated from vital medications were able to receive check-ups and temporary prescriptions from medical personnel at the shelter. “A pharmacy was donating one-week prescriptions to evacuees. We would call them in and send a runner to pick them up.”

Many of DeFurio’s and Cortes’ patients were the residents of a 125-bed assisted living facility that had been evacuated. While initially there was trepidation that it would be difficult for the seniors to adjust, shelters proved to be more than accommodating. “I remember

one older man whose main concern was that he would miss the football game that night,” Cortes said. “But come evening, he was set up comfortably in the church, watching the game on a widescreen TV!”

Community relief was so overwhelming, in fact, that some shelters had to gratefully ask donors to stop contributing. After evacuees returned home, the church where Cortes and DeFurio had volunteered became a distribution center for other shelters. Cortes returned on her next day off and helped load pickup trucks and sort donations.

CNA/NNOC Council of Presidents member Geri Jenkins, RN is a trauma nurse at UC San Diego. “UCSD is unique in that the trauma center, not the ER, triages burn victims,” she explained, telling how her fellow RNs treated numerous fire victims. Jenkins noted that while media reports mostly focused on wealthier communities and property damage caused by the fires, it was undocumented immigrants and lower-income people who got caught in the fire and actually suffered physical injuries.



In comparison with the Cedar firestorm four years prior, response was quicker, Jenkins said. “I think everyone learned a lot from the last fire. They implemented the reverse-911 calls, where you get a phone call telling you to evacuate, and the use of those calls, combined with early evacuation, saved a lot of lives.” Jenkins also notes that after Hurricane Katrina, it’s more widely understood how important companion animals are to evacuees. Many shelters were set up to receive dogs and cats travelling with evacuees, and Diablo Island in the San Diego Bay was recast as temporary accommodations for horses.

Jenkins agrees that the outpouring of volunteered time and goods was immediate and overwhelming, but emphasizes that volunteerism should not become a crutch for government response systems. “The community response was great, but the people need to know that there are government structures in place to depend on in situations such as these.”

Those who keep the RNRN program running agree with Jenkins’ assessment, noting that it received only one response after making myriad inquiries through official channels for all affected counties’ disaster relief programs. Placing volunteer RNs on the ground in San Diego County happened initially because evacuation sites were directly contacted by RNRN personnel and volunteers, staff said. Cortes claims a similar experience, saying that after volunteering her professional skills on multiple disaster relief websites, RNRN was the only agency to call her and give her an assignment.

Jenkins noted how interpretations of the adequacy of government response may be skewed as class differences come into sharp relief during times of disaster. “There are significant discrepancies when you ask low-income versus middle-class or affluent people to evacuate an area,” she said, noting that residents in New Orleans’ under-served communities had a difficult time heeding the call to evacuate in 2005, lacking cars or organized transport.

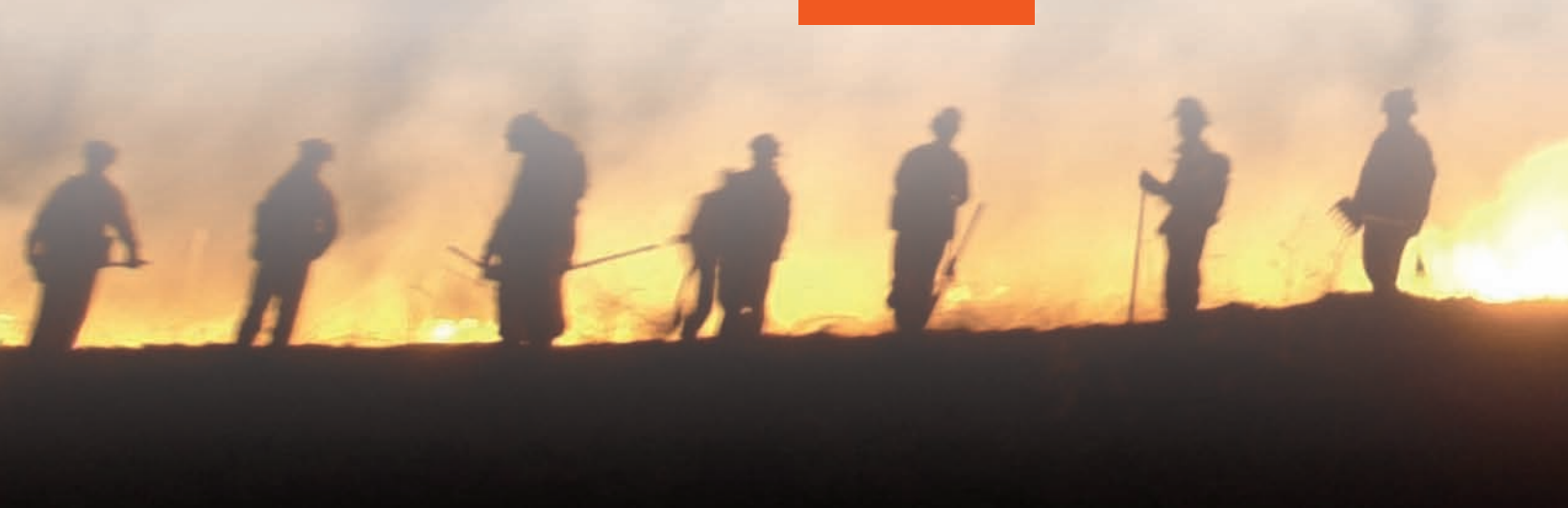
As seen in New Orleans, the hidden consequences of policies and budget cuts are also uncovered by catastrophes. Some areas, such as



Irvine, were disproportionately affected by what could have been moderately-controllable fires, because those fires developed after crews and equipment had been sent to help battle infernos in neighboring communities. More important, however, is that many fire departments have been severely impeded by budget restructuring and personnel cuts. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported on Oct. 28, the state requires that two firefighters act as backup for every two that enter a burning building. The Orange County Fire Authority is only able to staff engines with three people, making that requirement impossible to follow.

Afrack Vargas, a spokesman for the California State Firefighters’ Association, explained the problem to the *Times* in words that have a ring of familiarity to nurses: “When you lose one person on the crew, you’re sacrificing safety... It makes a difficult situation that much more difficult.” Having struggled to implement and enforce nurse-to-patient ratios, California’s nurses are acutely aware of how

For more information on the RN Response Network, visit www.calnurses.org/rnrn.



staffing shortages can create dangerous situations that threaten both professionals and the civilians entrusted to their care. The unannounced arrival of a disaster can exacerbate these situations to a deadly level.

“The heroic efforts of our firefighters, nurses, and other emergency personnel deserve our highest praise,” CNA/NNOC Council of Presidents member Deborah Burger, RN said. “But it is disgraceful to deprive them of the support they need in a moment of crisis.”

Indeed, availability of all needed resources is critical when facing massive natural disasters such as earthquakes or wildfires. As in the days and weeks following Hurricane Katrina, many are asking if more resources could not have been made available here at home were it not for ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. While 1,500 of the California National Guard were assigned to assist in the fire, it is unclear how many of the estimated 20,000 statewide Guard members are deployed overseas. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s office says the number is 2,500, while independent estimates put the number as high as 6,000.

Vital equipment, too, has been reallocated to conflicts in the Middle East. In June, California National Guard officials told *USA Today* that they were short 800 Humvees, 700 medium tactical vehicles, and 50 heavy lifter trucks. Overall, *USA Today* estimated that only half of the Guard’s California equipment was readily available in the case of natural disasters. In May, the Guard’s director of public affairs, Lt. Col. John Siepmann, warned the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the Guard’s response capabilities had been severely compromised by the ongoing war. “Our concern is a catastrophic event. You would see a less effective response.”

Leaders in other areas of the United States, taking note of federal response to crises like Hurricane Katrina and the recent California wildfires, have voiced concern for the diminished capabilities of their own states’ National Guards. New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson noted that on the same day he sent 10 engines and more than 40 firefighters to California to assist local fire crews, 300 New Mexico Guard members were sent to Iraq. New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine was equally per-

turbed by the planned deployment of further New Jersey Guard members to the Middle East, claiming that such diversions are “undermining the basic purpose of the National Guard, which is to protect local and state elements from floods and fires.”

With dwindling funds for fire departments and a poached population of Guard members impeding the fire and rescue efforts, Schwarzenegger had to turn to California inmates to help fight the fires. On Oct. 22, Schwarzenegger instructed 2,300 inmate firefighters to join forces with city and county fire crews to battle the blazes.

While all can be grateful that the wildfires wound down with a relatively low number of casualties, the factors behind the fires and response should, as always, be held to the highest scrutiny. “Response went very well this time, and I think we were very lucky that most everyone managed to evacuate safely,” said Jenkins. “But there is always room for improvement.”

In the meantime, the generous RNs who are willing to volunteer in the face of disaster keep their fingers on the pulse of the world’s news, knowing that if and when the next emergency arises, they will be ready to give help where it is needed most.

DeFurio was grateful that she could use her skills during such a difficult time, and pleased that so many of her colleagues answered the call for help. “They were having trouble finding doctors who could volunteer, but every time I asked if they needed more nurses to volunteer, I was told there was a surplus of nurses who were willing to help.”

Cortes was similarly moved by the experience of helping others in their time of need, and even more touched by witnessing how entire communities pitched in. “People just showed up with pickup trucks and asked, ‘How can I help?’ It was a great thing to see.” When asked why she volunteered, she replied, “You see this kind of thing on TV, and you feel sympathy from the heart. It’s good to help other people, but more importantly, it’s good for your soul.” ■

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