

During wildfires, parish houses disabled evacuees

LEMON GROVE, Calif. – Fifty-eight residents of a Catholic care facility for developmentally disabled adults were among the hundreds of thousands of San Diego County residents displaced by the region's wildfires.

The residents of Noah Homes in Spring Valley were temporarily moved to the parish hall of St. John of the Cross Parish in the neighboring city of Lemon Grove.

Noah Homes houses 65 men and women with developmental disabilities including autism, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy. Some of the residents are also seeing- and hearing-impaired, and some have Alzheimer's disease.

Monsignor Edward Brockhaus, pastor at St. John, said he was glad to offer his parish hall as a temporary shelter.

"My philosophy has always been that all the facilities are for the community, not just the parishioners," Monsignor Brockhaus told The Southern Cross, newspaper of the San Diego Diocese. "We're part of the community, and we've got to give back to the community."

The evacuees stayed in the parish hall until Oct. 26, when it was safe to return to Noah Homes. Although the care facility had been close to one of the wildfires, it was not damaged.

As of Oct. 28, California's Office of Emergency Services reported the wildfires had destroyed 2,767 structures, including 2,013 homes.

More than 900,000 people were evacuated, but as the fires were contained most evacuees were back in their neighborhoods by the weekend of Oct. 27-28 to see what had become of their homes.

Property damage in San Diego County alone reportedly surpassed \$1 billion.

Catholic Charities USA, based in Alexandria, Va., was providing emergency funding for shelter, food and clothing, and local Catholic Charities agencies were gearing up

for long-term response.

At Noah Homes, staff and residents first became aware of the wildfires when they started Oct. 21. As the fires worsened, the facility's employees began to prepare for a possible evacuation, giving backpacks to each resident with a change of clothes and personal belongings. Arrangements were made with St. John's to use the parish hall as a shelter.

Maureen Carasiti, executive director of Noah Homes, also contacted Father Joe's Villages, a San Diego-based network of programs for the homeless community. The organization responded by bringing 50 cots, with blankets and pillows, to the parish hall. The cots were already set up and ready to welcome the evacuees when they arrived.

While the evacuees stayed at the hall they were given hot meals three times a day from Catholic service agencies. Workers from Noah Homes, who worked around the clock during the evacuation, also took residents to their homes for showers and laundry.

The 58 who were evacuated had not yet been picked up by family members before the mandatory evacuation was declared. By Oct. 24 fewer than 30 residents were still under the care of Noah Homes because family members were able to come and get the others.

Evacuating a large group of adults with developmental disabilities poses unique challenges, according to Sister Mary Bartosh, a sister of the Community of the Holy Spirit and program director at Noah Homes.

Many of the residents are "very locked into their routines," Sister Bartosh said. For example, residents with Alzheimer's find "being in an unfamiliar situation ... particularly challenging," she said.

Those with autism were less comfortable in a crowded shelter than at Noah Homes, where they have much more privacy. Various medical and dietary also needed to be addressed.

The evacuation would have been much more difficult, Sister Bartosh said, if St. John

of the Cross had not made its parish hall available. Residents are much more comfortable when surrounded by familiar faces, she added.

“It was an intense experience,” she said. “Our psychologist has told us that it would be really advisable not to have the folks watching footage of fire,” and an effort was made to “divert people’s attention and stress the good things of life that are happening here.”

During the time away from her home, Noreen Magner said she was scared but knew they all were safe and “in God’s hands.”