

Award-Winning Team Helps Residents Recover from Disaster

BASTROP COUNTY, TX - During the Labor Day weekend of 2011, Bastrop County was devastated by the biggest wildfire that the state of Texas had ever experienced. More than 1,600 homes burned; residents felt overwhelmed.

When the smoke and fire subsided, 276 homeowners were confronted with the reality of being homeless and in desperate need of help. The households were low-income, underinsured, or did not have insurance at all.

The Bastrop County Office of Emergency Management, coordinated by Michael Fisher, recognized that it would take years to recover from the damage inflicted by the fire. The result was the creation of the Bastrop County Long Term Recovery Team (LTRT) comprised of 11 employees that sprang into action immediately. Its mission was to help those 276 families.

Among the LTRT members was Program Coordinator Janice Butler, who lost her home in the fire and knew firsthand what the homeowners were facing. Fellow team member Sheila Lowe, Case Management Supervisor and also a resident of the community, was glad to be a part of the recovery process.

The team's priorities included setting up guidelines, screening applicants to make sure there was no duplication of benefits, welcoming volunteers, holding counseling sessions, distributing flyers, accepting donations, and beginning the process of building back the community.

An important tool employed by the LTRT was its website, which provided team contact information, a way for volunteers to communicate with staff, a platform for announcements and a place to receive cash and in-kind donations. The site also featured photos and success stories.

Through fundraising, grants, and partnerships, the group raised more than \$4 million toward the recovery efforts. In addition, volunteers worked in excess of 500,000 hours to assist hundreds of residents with everything from debris cleanup to the rebuilding of homes. Other projects included building storage sheds and decks, and assisting ranchers with repairing fences.

A significant component of the LTRT services was case-management. Counseling with individuals was provided in many cases to explanation topics such as insurance and/or how to spend recovery dollars wisely.

In 2013, the Bastrop County Long Term Recovery Team received an award from the Texas Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters for its "commitment, outstanding performance, and lasting contributions to rebuilding the state of Texas."

After three years of assisting homeowners, the team completed its successful mission and ceased operations, not realizing at the time that the closure was only temporary. Three months after the LTRT ended the program, residents of Bastrop were faced with another catastrophic situation.

On Memorial Day weekend 2015, flooding of epic proportions ravaged the state of Texas, damaging homes and destroying lives. Bastrop found itself in the path of rising floodwaters entering homes and destructive tornadoes springing up. Hundreds of homes were impacted. One home was completely destroyed by the tornado. Sadly, 26 families who lost their homes in the 2011 fire found themselves disaster survivors once again.

The Bastrop County Long Term Recovery Team was reactivated on May 27, 2015. As before, Butler and Lowe joined forces. Along with two other employees, their collective mission was to help individuals and families who sustained damage in the flood and tornado events.

"This time the situation was different," noted Butler, adding that most of the houses, while not totally gone, were in need of major repairs. "Also, many residents were familiar with the process, so that made it easier," Lowe said observing that "the resilience of Bastrop is huge."

For this disaster, the county emergency management office set up a hotline so individuals could call for



assistance. The result was a working list so team members could have immediate contact with affected families. Also, the team made it a point to make frequent visits to the nearby FEMA Disaster Recovery Center to make contact with and assist survivors.

For additional information about the Bastrop County Long-Term Recovery Team, visit: <http://www.bastropcountylongtermrecovery.org/>.



Photo1 – Sign is displayed outside of the building where LTRO is housed.

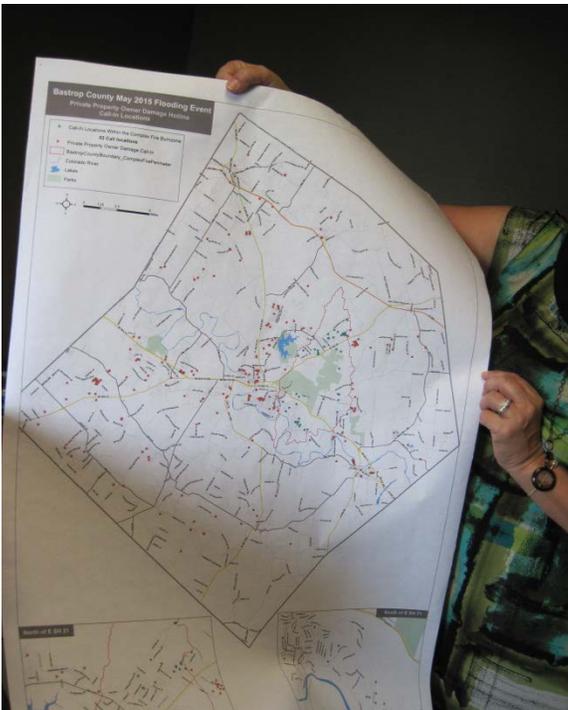


Photo2 – Map shows where destroyed homes are located in Bastrop County.