

News Release

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Jackson County 2020 wildfire survivors achieve major recovery milestone enabling closure of the Oregon Department of Human Services' long-term shelter program

(Salem) – Since Dec. 31, 2020, the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) has been providing long-term shelter in Jackson County to survivors of the 2020 Labor Day wildfires. With the support of multiple organizations, on March 23, the last of these survivors were able to move out of ODHS shelter into their own home.

[Oregon's Emergency Operations Plan](#) gives ODHS the responsibility of supporting the food and shelter needs of people in Oregon during large-scale emergencies and recovery from disasters.

“Our ability to shelter, feed and support so many survivors of the 2020 Labor Day wildfires was only possible due to successful collaboration with community-based organizations,” said ODHS Direct Fariborz Pakseresht (he/him). “We are grateful to our partners at Catholic Charities of Oregon, Fortify Holdings, Rogue Community Health and Rogue Food Unites for coming together to support the health and wellbeing of the survivors in our community.”

Coordinated by the ODHS Office of Resilience and Emergency Management and in collaboration with community-based organizations, 803 wildfire survivors with a verified structural loss were provided long-term shelter, healthy meals and access to recovery support from disaster case managers.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2020 Labor Day Wildfires, survivors were initially sheltered in various hotels across the region. Fortify Holdings was a critical partner with ODHS in providing long-term shelter to survivors. Fortify Holdings purchased four hotel properties in Medford that were then used by ODHS to provide long-term shelter to survivors. With survivors living in the four central locations, ODHS was able to effectively provide direct support to the survivors.

“Fortify is thrilled to have partnered with ODHS, Oregon Housing and Community Services, Rogue Community Health, and ACCESS to help wildfire survivors in

Jackson County,” said Ziad Elshahili (he/him) president of Fortify Holdings. “Together, we were able to quickly transform motels into shelters and homes for those who lost theirs and create a community of support. We are happy to be part of the housing solution and to have been able to provide hope to those recovering from the 2020 wildfires.”

ODHS collaborated with Rogue Food Unites to provide three meals a day to survivors at the four locations. Many of the shelter rooms didn’t have kitchens, and it was essential to provide quality and healthy meals to support survivors’ ability to stay healthy.

“Rogue Food Unites is grateful for the partnership with ODHS that has enabled us to help feed people in multiple southern counties for over two years, during numerous challenging crises,” said Amber Ferguson (she/her), executive director of Rogue Food Unites. “ODHS’ willingness to partner with local community-based organizations who know their communities well helped bring widespread success to this feeding mission. We are grateful for the continued partnership.”

Disaster case management is an important support for people recovering from a disaster. Navigating local, state and federal recovery systems is complex and difficult and can be traumatizing for survivors. Disaster case managers from Catholic Charities of Oregon, Rogue Community Health and ODHS worked with survivors to support them as they went through the difficult process of recovery.

In addition to disaster case management support, Rogue Community Health worked with all survivors to identify and solve additional barriers during their recovery, separate from housing.

“Rogue Community Health is proud to have been a key partner in providing essential support to those impacted by the recent wildfires,” said William North, executive officer of Rogue Community Health. “Over the past year, hundreds of people found the care and services they needed in a time of crisis. We will continue building innovative partnerships and embrace locally led solutions to elevate the health and well-being in the community we call home. We will continue working alongside our partners to address systemic health, equity and social inequities so that all community members can realize whole person health and well-being.”

ACCESS, Oregon Housing and Community Services and Jackson County Community Long Term Recovery Group also supported many survivors as they sought out long-term and permanent housing.

“ACCESS is grateful for our partnership with ODHS,” says Carrie Borgen (she/her), executive director for ACCESS. “We worked collaboratively together over the past few years to respond to our community’s immense needs after the 2020 wildfires.

We have had great success working as partners to help fire survivors stabilize their housing situation and rebuild their lives, and we are proud of the impact we have had in Jackson County.”

While ODHS is now able to end its sheltering work in Jackson County, the area is not yet fully recovered from the 2020 wildfires. Many residents are still displaced from their homes where they lived at the time of the fires. Ninety-one individuals continue to receive disaster case management support to address recovery needs. Local organizations and state agencies continue their work to stabilize the survivors.

About the ODHS Office of Resilience and Emergency Management

ODHS holds three distinct roles through its Office of Resilience and Emergency Management, all of which reduce the impact of disasters on people. In its most foundational role, OREM staff work every day with ODHS programs, offices and affiliated agencies, to ensure the safety of the people served by our programs, and our staff. The second role is as the lead agency for cooling, warming and cleaner air centers to protect the public from life-threatening weather and related events. The third role is as the primary agency for mass care and social services recovery, as outlined in Oregon’s comprehensive emergency operations and recovery plans. In this role, ODHS supports the evacuation, sheltering, feeding, emergency assistance, family reunification, distribution of emergency supplies and human services needs of people impacted by disasters.

Across all these roles, ODHS develops and relies on partnerships and coordination with public and private organizations at the local and regional levels and with our state and Tribal Nation partners.

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