

RECOVERY IN BUTTE COUNTY A YEAR AFTER THE CAMP FIRE

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Background

In November 2018, the Camp Fire—the deadliest and most destructive fire in California history—raged through Paradise, in the northern part of the state. The numbers are staggering—85 residents lost their lives, and nearly 19,000 buildings were destroyed, including 11,000 houses. The toll on residents and responders was significant. One year later, and based on findings from needs assessments and general observations, ASPR Recovery staff identified the need to address stress, distress, and compassion fatigue among residents, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) staff, and city municipal workers impacted by long-term exposure of the Camp Fire.

ASPR's behavioral health subject matter experts developed training curricula to target the specific needs of the following groups still deeply engaged in recovery work in California:

- FEMA Recovery leadership staff in Sacramento
- FEMA field staff staged in Oroville
- School counselors in Butte County
- Municipal workers in Oroville, Chico, and Paradise
- Police personnel working in Paradise

The goal of these trainings is to assist participants to communicate effectively with people who are in crisis and to manage difficult or distressing conversations. Each session included content on self-care and resilience strategies to prevent or address compassion fatigue to use at work as well as in everyday life. These interactive workshops allowed participants to share things they had experienced or done that been helpful in terms of self-care and stress management over the past year.

Process Changes and Feedback by Target Group

FEMA Recovery leadership staff in Sacramento were very interested in organizational approaches to resilience and communication strategies. They had less direct exposure to the fires but were extremely concerned about workers who were still managing the needs of survivors – themselves included.

FEMA field staff were mandated to attend the sessions and thus were a little resistant at first. ASPR Recovery staff realized that time was a stressor for these employees, as their individual workloads increased while the recovery mission wound down and staff transitioned out. To acknowledge this, staff abbreviated the original four-hour course to two-hour sessions. Participants became very engaged and seemed to particularly enjoy sharing experiences in which they felt they had been able to be helpful or comforting to survivors. Several of these workers were also survivors and robust discussion about empathy and the inherent risks in identifying strongly with clients occurred. The field sessions all concluded on very positive notes with participants providing specific examples of how each would improve or enhance their own self-care.

Butte County school counselors participated in a session on Compassion Fatigue and Cognitive Strengthening. This group was well versed in the concepts of grief, stress, trauma, and empathy. They discussed the elements that made their work fulfilling, even as difficult as it can be day to day. The children these practitioners work with are often in difficult and unpredictable home situations and many had lost homes, possessions, and even pets in the fire.

ASPR ABC's [Building Workforce Resilience through the Practice of Psychological First Aid](#) is a free course available through NACCHO University (free registration required). Access the [ABC Resource Library](#) for additional resources.

ASPR TRACIE's modules on [Self Care for Healthcare Workers Modules](#) provide information on understanding and managing stress, compassion fatigue, and more. Links to additional resources can be found on the [Disaster Behavioral Health Resources](#) page.





The focus of these school counselors was to manage daily exposure to these stressors and remain healthy and connected to their work. One takeaway from this session was that helping each other make sense of this tragedy on a regular basis was important.

The sessions conducted with *municipal workers and city staff in Chico and in Paradise* were particularly challenging. The pressure these individuals were under to rapidly advance recovery and rebuilding made it challenging to take any time for self-care or self-reflection. As with the FEMA field staff, most of these individuals were directly impacted by the fires and virtually all of them had a close family member or friend who had lost their homes. They felt it important that their role of “first responders” during the fire and in the aftermath be understood. They had more interest in explaining their specific roles in the recovery efforts – whether that was reestablishing utilities, assisting survivors with building permits and financial assistance, or navigating the political landscape with the county and the state as assistance and funding became more available. The City Managers for Chico and for Paradise each attended a session and city leadership was well represented. The diverse nature of these groups made it prudent to spend a little more time on identifying stress reactions and pragmatic ways to address them. Evaluations from this group were strong as it seemed there had been very little opportunity for this kind of gathering and discussion that was focused on their needs and not just on those they serve and assist.

The final session was directed to the *Paradise Police Department*. The entire force attended the training sessions, including the Chief of Police. This group was extremely impacted by the fires; most had their own homes and possessions in harm’s way while they worked to swiftly evacuate the town in extremely dangerous

circumstances. After the fire, most of the officers and staff relocated to nearby communities which further contributed to disrupted social cohesion. The department suffered from a loss of officers who went to work for other police departments (e.g., Oroville and Chico). The City Manager and Police Chief stressed that decisions such as increasing wages for officers were helpful in mitigating some of the staff turnover but not completely successful in ensuring a full staff for the ongoing efforts to prepare the town for rebuilding. As a group, the officers were less forthcoming, but this is still common for many in this profession. Many emphasized their reliance on one another and noted that everyone remained willing to pitch in to help each other. That said, several officers described stress reactions that were concerning and in some cases were resulting in broader health concerns. The content of this course emphasized resources that this population would be more likely to access given the perceived stigma often associated with help-seeking among this group.

Conclusion

Overall, the sessions conducted in the recovery phase of the California Wildfires were valuable and appreciated. However, the ongoing and cumulative effects of a slow and challenging recovery are posing great risks to everyone involved. In order to continue to address these issues and promote helpful, healing resources, additional educational materials were provided electronically after the sessions. However, a training curriculum designed to train community members to provide these kinds of small group, interactive workshops should be developed to make a lasting contribution to Paradise and Butte County residents. This curriculum could also be tailored by other communities in response to or in advance of future disasters.

Encouraging pre-disaster, cross-jurisdictional planning to identify resources and assets and to leverage training opportunities could make the work in the recovery phase more seamless.



Please contact disaster.recovery@hhs.gov for more information.

