

8 Ways to Help after a House Fire

SafeBee

Here are the top items survivors may need for health, safety and comfort

A family whose home goes up in flames may lose everything — but simple items from friends, neighbors and relatives can help them make it safely and comfortably through the next days, weeks and months.

Needs of fire survivors vary based on where they are staying after the fire: with relatives, at a hotel, at a Red Cross shelter, in temporary housing or in new permanent housing. That may depend on whether they owned or rented the home that burned down and whether they had renters or home owners insurance, says Emily Rogan, program coordinator for United Policyholders, a nonprofit organization that helps victims of fires and other disasters navigate insurance issues.

Here are eight of the top items someone whose house burned down might need.

1. New socks and underwear. After a fire, the most basic items are the most needed, says Giselle Bisson, a California communications professional who survived a house fire as a child and then saw neighbors lose everything in a 2015 wildfire that destroyed more than 1,000 homes. Bisson was temporarily renting a cottage in the area where the fire broke out. The items most requested by victims of the fire were clean socks and undergarments, she says.
2. Clothing. A family that endured a fire may have escaped with only the clothes on their backs, and the garments and shoes left behind may have been destroyed or badly damaged by smoke. But unless the fire survivor is someone close to you — like your sister — don't buy clothes for them or give them your used shirts, sweaters and pants, Rogan says. It can be overwhelming to get loads of clothes in random sizes. Instead, she suggests, give a gift card to a store that sells clothing so they can choose items that fit.
3. Toiletries. In the immediate aftermath of a fire, survivors need personal hygiene essentials, Bisson

says. They may need toothbrushes, toothpaste, deodorant, feminine products and headache medication. Depending on where the family is staying, they might also need soap, shampoo, conditioner, toilet paper, wash cloths and towels. If they're at a hotel, they might not need all those items yet, so it's smart to ask.

4. Seasonal necessities. Is it rainy, snowy or bitter cold? The family might need season-specific items. For example, one of the things New York mom and blog author Stacy Geisinger most appreciated after losing everything in a fire was a pair of winter boots for her son. "It was January and snowing," she says. Schools were closed, but a friend braved the bad weather to deliver the boots, she says.

5. Healthy food. Consider giving food, but steer clear of items that need to be refrigerated, Rogan says. Gift cards to grocery stores or restaurants help a lot, Rogan says. And you might want to supply inexpensive staples such as a relaxing tea, she says. "Do they enjoy a cup of tea before bed?" she says. "It could be something as simple as that."

6. Toys for the kids. One kind act Beth Granger remembers more than a decade after a fire destroyed her family's rental house: Kind friends and neighbors provided a little something special for her sons, then aged 6 and 10. The local bookstore owner, who had records of her purchases, replaced books she had bought recently plus added in some extras. A friend bought a gaming system for her older son, who loved video games. Another friend bought a giant stuffed tiger for her younger son, she says.

7. Pots and pans. After the fire survivors have moved into temporary or new permanent housing, they'll need new cookware. A gift of new pots and pans from a friend made a huge difference for Geisinger after she moved into temporary housing, she says.

8. Furniture. Once the family has settled into their new home, they'll need everything from a couch to a dining room table to a new TV – basically, everything that fills a house. "You really are starting from scratch," Geisinger says.

One thing to keep in mind: Donations, especially of large items such as appliances, electronics or furniture, can end up creating extra work for the overwhelmed fire survivors who have to sort through them and figure out what to do with them or find a place to store them until they're ready to move into temporary or new permanent housing. On the other hand, gift cards are small, light and give the recipient more control.

“When in doubt, give a gift card,” Rogan says.