

[County has provided mental health services for victims of '07 fires](#)

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After his Fallbrook home was destroyed in the 2007 wildfires, Richard McDonnell realized that his friends didn't understand his sense of loss, the grieving for destroyed heirlooms or the frustration over the the slow rebuilding process.

Then McDonnell, 63, began attending the weekly group meetings at the Fallbrook Recovery Center, where he met fellow fire survivors.

"There's a kind of lifeboat mentality," McDonnell said. "People who have not been through it don't have a full understanding. When you have other fire survivors, you have this instant rapport."

The weekly meetings are run by Mental Health Systems Inc., one of three agencies the county has under a contract to provide mental health services for fire victims. The agency's contract ends this month.

The past year has taken an emotional toll on the 1,646 families who lost their homes in the flames that roared across San Diego County in October 2007.

County officials and those assisting the fire victims have been working not only to help them rebuild their homes but to deal with the range of emotions that come with the process.

The county's Wildfire Recovery Project has served more than 4,000 people in since the fires, according to a recent report by the San Diego Foundation.

After the fires, the county received a \$1.5 million federal grant to provide immediate mental health services for fire victims, said Katie Astor, the county's project director for wildfire recovery. After that grant ended in April, the county received a \$1.3 million grant to provide long-term mental health services that runs until Nov. 21.

A \$231,000 grant to two private agencies from the San Diego Foundation will extend some mental health services for several more months, but the program serving Fallbrook, Valley Center and the La Jolla Indian Reservation ends Nov. 21.

Astor said she hopes community members will step in and keep the groups running. McDonnell said he plans to keep his group going in Fallbrook.

“As long as people want to get together, I’m certainly willing to do it,” he said.

The meetings, held at fire recovery centers, deal with issues ranging from insurance to the common stages of grief after a crisis. Astor said much of the mental health focus has been on creating support groups or providing creative outlets for fire victims instead of one-on-one counseling.

“Very few want or need individual counseling),” said Reneé DuVerger, wildlife recovery program director for the Community Research Foundation, whose agency is working with East County fire victims. “They are very proud and independent folks.”

Some sessions have covered helping parents deal with their children’s reactions to the fires and their aftermath, said Rebecca Culjat, program manager for Mental Health Systems’ wildfire recovery project. “They’re not able to put it in the same context that an adult would,” she said. “How do you talk to a kid and be honest with them without creating anxiety?”

Other agencies also have stepped in, including Jewish Family Services, the Salvation Army and a mentoring program run by United Policyholders, an organization providing insurance information. Jewish Family Services has been offering six sessions of free counseling to any fire victim. At its peak, the agency had 415 clients who survived the fires; that number is now down to about 170.

Gianna Muir-Robinson, disaster relief coordinator, said counselors have seen clients dealing with marital strife, anxiety or flashbacks since the fires.

Many assisting fire victims learned from the October 2003 fires that people who lose their homes go through a roller coaster of feelings, much like the stages of the grieving process.

Karen Reimus of United Policyholders, who lost her Scripps Ranch home in the Cedar fire, put together a team of about 80 other people who lost homes in that fire to help those whose homes burned in 2007. They talk about practical issues such as dealing with insurance companies, but the connection is much deeper, she said.

“There’s nothing like talking to somebody who’s been there,” Reimus said.

Dawn Hubert, a Crest resident who began helping her neighbors who lost their homes in the 2003 fires, is a Salvation Army employee working with East County residents who lost their homes in the Harris fire. She said Salvation Army workers have made about three referrals a month for clients who need mental health counseling. Hubert knows from experience that some fire victims will take years to rebuild.

McDonnell, who hopes to have construction of his new house completed by January, said the meetings he has attended have provided practical advice and emotional support.

“It really is pretty comforting and helps you go through whatever it is that you have to go through,” he said.