

## [Last year's fire victims offer a shoulder at disaster recovery center](#)

Colorado Springs Gazette

When Suzanne and Breck Swanson turned on the television on Wednesday, they watched their retirement home on Vessey Road explode in flames.

With it went Suzanne's sense of control, and all ideas of what to do next. But the next day at the El Paso County Disaster Assistance Center, she regained some confidence from an unexpected source – a group of people who lost their homes during the Waldo Canyon fire.

Steve Price, who lost his home last summer, sat with the Swansons and walked through the saga of settling insurance claims for homes lost in a wildfire. Suzanne arrived at the center feeling “shaky inside still,” she said, as she was led through a maze of services offered by the Red Cross and other organizations.

Many groups, including counselors from AspenPointe, had done this before, when last summer's Waldo Canyon fire prompted the opening of the same center, followed by 11 months of counseling, rebuilding, and lessons learned.

But to the Swansons and nearly 100 other families who flooded into the center on Thursday, this was all new. And Steve Price was living proof that it was all going to be ok, eventually.

“I feel like we're in control,” Suzanne said. “I can take control and go.”

The Swansons evacuated to a relative's house, which was then put under voluntary evacuation. Rather than sit, and wait and wonder, they can start putting together the exhaustive list of lost household items that some Waldo Canyon survivors have yet to complete a year later.

Overlapping disaster recovery

The recovery from the Waldo Canyon fire is ongoing, while the full-fledged recovery from the Black Forest fire, which has surpassed the Waldo Canyon fire in home losses and the number of evacuees, has yet to begin.

Many homeowners waiting for assistance at the center, off Garden of the Gods Road, had yet to learn the fate of their homes. They chatted with neighbors, recounting tales of evacuations. Some held their dogs

in their arms. One man waited for help and rifled through a bag of toiletries and medications. Four Waldo Canyon fire survivors, who met during the ensuing months while grappling with grief or insurance, were at the center. Chris Carlson, who lost her home last summer, offered emotional advice and guidance; as a member of the Waldo Women support group, she is hoping to start a similar group in Black Forest. Kerri Olivier, whose home survived but was heavily smoke damaged, manned a table for United Policyholders, non-profit insurance advocacy group. And Karla Heard-Price, Price's wife, offered insurance guidance to a homeowner who didn't know if her home had survived. When she finished, Heard-Price hugged the woman, gave her a card, and told her not to be stranger.

As of noon, about 73 families had come through the center, and were processed by a system created during the Waldo Canyon fire, said El Paso County Commissioner Peggy Littleton. The center will be open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays for as long as necessary; it will also be open this Saturday and Sunday, Littleton said.

A few Black Forest residents stopped at the AspenPointe crisis counseling table to chat. Jeremy Oshiem and Rebecca Yount, both wearing badges that read "Waldo Canyon Support Team," greeted them with familiar smiles – they had both done this before. Oshiem and Yount spent the past 10 months helping Waldo Canyon survivors work through the aftermath of that fire, which burned 347 homes and killed two people.

"We all have emotions," Yount said. "Whether people realize it or not, they are going to feel those at different times."

On Thursday, Yount noticed a roll-reversal trend – several Black Forest residents had evacuated to Mountain Shadows, to stay with friends who had evacuated to their homes last summer. One man went up to Woodland Park to stay with a friend who he had hosted when the town was evacuated last summer, Yount said.

The AspenPointe team's FEMA grant will run out at the end of July, Yount said. Whether or not it will get more money for Black Forest fire counseling remains to be seen.

One day at a time

A month down the road is too far ahead for the Swansons, who are trying to make it through the week. They managed to joke about evacuating their home on Tuesday – Suzanne raced across meadows and plowed through barbed wire fences to get back home, after deputies turned her away at roads. Together they loaded up belongings – videos, important documents and photos. Suzanne had to leave her beloved book collection behind, otherwise it would have filled up their entire car, she said.

The couple moved into their home at 6030 Vessey Road four years ago. It was their retirement home – "more of a fixer-upper," Breck said – and they hoped it would be the last home they'd ever buy.

They can both laugh at the irony. But they think of their home - their picnic table, their greenhouse, their new garden, their slash-piles they forgot to remove - in present tense.

“We have one cherry growing in our brand new cherry tree,” Suzanne said. “Or, had.”