

Park Fire Survivors Stuck in Recovery Limbo as Officials Figure Out What to Do

KQED

Under a low-slung ceiling of flashing disco lights, Yahmo Ahqha roared into the mic during his band's practice.

The band, called Yahmo, is in the performance space of an independent radio station in Chico. They have shows coming up, want to record an album, and need to stay sharp.

It's a moment of some normalcy in Ahqha's week, doing what he loves. But outside of rehearsal, his life is one of uncertainty, anything but normal. Ahqha, like many of his friends, lost his Cohasset home in the hills north of Chico in the Park Fire, which broke out on July 24.

Ahqha was playing with his 9-year-old son at their home when the fire touched off near Bidwell Park in Chico and roared up toward them. An alert to leave came through on his phone, and they jumped in a car and left.

"I'm still kind of processing, really," he said. "I'm super happy to be alive, and my son, too."

Like many affected by the Park Fire, he was uninsured. The disaster, as of right now, doesn't clearly meet the Federal Emergency Management Agency's threshold for aid: \$73 million in structural losses. That's when the president declares a major disaster and deems the incident beyond the combined capabilities of state and local governments to respond.

So, California is trying to negotiate with the federal government. But the result is that Ahqha and other survivors are left in a bureaucratic quagmire of uncertainty.

With no clarity from the county, state or federal government about what victims should expect next, he is

one of hundreds of survivors in a vortex of trying to help himself while asking for help through a GoFundMe, while helping others, while waiting for answers from officials.

It seems unbelievable, affected residents said, that after so many bad fires, there isn't a set way to handle recovery.

"I'm grateful there's a really good community here," Ahqha said. "A lot of people are pulling together."

But, he said, relief options are limited.

"So we're, really, a lot of people, anybody uninsured, is in a pretty rough spot right now," he said.

Butte County Supervisor Doug Teeter, who represents the area affected by the Park Fire, said he understands why survivors are upset.

"The people don't understand that [officials] are waiting for someone to figure out whose pocketbook this is coming out of. It's a pretty crappy answer, isn't it?"

Officials at a loss for answers

Residents of the heavily impacted community of Cohasset and nearby Forest Ranch are trying to figure out who, if anyone, will pick up the tab for even the first basic steps of recovery, like debris cleanup. Although the California Department of Toxic Substances Control has cleared many properties of immediate hazards.

Ahqha called his congressional representative, Doug LaMalfa, asking for his office to apply some pressure for some movement to get help.

"Right now, everybody is saying they're waiting on the California Office of Emergency Services, they're the ones responsible for validating the requirements for FEMA. It's not my area of expertise, but I'm having a crash course in it," Ahqha said. "It's just a waiting game with bad odds."

The problem is that it is unclear what government organization will take responsibility for assistance. In personal conversations, on the Cohasset private Facebook group and in public community meetings, people are frustrated with being stuck in an information void.

CalOES did not respond to a KQED request for an interview.

Unlike the nearby 2018 Camp Fire, which ignited from a PG&E transmission line, officials believe the cause of the Park Fire was arson. Butte County prosecutors have charged Ronnie Dean Stout II with the crime, alleging that he pushed a flaming car off a cliff. He has told investigators that the car caught fire accidentally and that he fled the area because he was frightened. He pled not guilty in August.

“There’s no FEMA,” Ahqha said. “It’s not like we can sue PG&E.”

PG&E settled for half a billion dollars in liabilities stemming from the Camp Fire.

Why isn’t there a plan that’s just ready to roll out?

Supervisor Teeter, whose own home in Paradise was destroyed by the Camp Fire, said he hears the frustration.

“I was at the [Cohasset Community] meeting and they’re like: ‘You guys should have a plan. There’s been enough fires. You should have a plan that’s just ready to roll out,’” Teeter said.

Butte County has recovery plans from the Camp and North Complex fires, he explained. But if officials started doing residential waste cleanup themselves, it could risk making the county ineligible for state or federal aid because each fire is responded to uniquely depending on who is calling the shots at the time.

“It’s not like [agencies] go, ‘You do this, we’ll guarantee the money.’ They audit the heck out of you,” Teeter said. “So you can’t just go, ‘OK, we’re going to start, on the county dime, cleaning up these parcels and then just expect out of the blue FEMA’s going to fully fund it.”

It took until Wednesday, Sept. 11, for Butte County to announce they had received formal approval from CalOES to begin debris removal on private properties — almost 50 days after the fire broke out.

Residents do not yet have details on what that means for them.

“The County and State will work together to stand up the debris removal program. Information will be shared on the County website as it becomes available,” a press release said.

Teeter’s belief, he said, is that state officials want to help, but they first want to exhaust all opportunities

to get reimbursed by FEMA. So, the county wants the state to come in, and the state wants FEMA to come in. So that, "Ultimately, the feds are the ones on the hook for the dollars." Currently, he does not know if FEMA will help.

For property owners without insurance, companies pay out money to cover debris removal. However, many homeowners use this money for other expenses, such as rebuilding costs, according to Amy Bach of United Policyholders, a nonprofit that helps people navigate insurance matters post-disaster. People might "need every dime of the insurance coverage that they have just to put their house back," she said. "So often, the hope is that the debris removal is going to be funded by the government. That's what people pray for, right?"

But there can be uncertainty, a worry that those people will be asked to pay some portion of their insurance payout back to whoever does the local cleanup. "And that's a tricky dynamic."

Adding to the general uncertainty and exasperation, at the moment, the county's advice is that Park Fire survivors should not even return to their property to retrieve valuables or mementos that may have survived the flames. The county's concern is that disturbing and spreading the ash could compromise people's ability to be included in a government cleanup program.

"To me, that's not acceptable," Teeter said. "It's not fair to people that believe they have stuff that they want to find, like jewelry or ceramics. That's their right. That's the biggest frustration that I want something solved ASAP on."

Teeter has requested that CalOES issue a clear policy on retrievals, but that has not happened yet.

Getting on their feet as best they can

Survivors have received some aid. The American Red Cross responded quickly and set up an aid center at the invitation of the county. Several survivors spoke of receiving cash aid from the organization, which they used to pay bills, buy food or replace basic items.

Other community organizations have also aided in relief through gift cards, grants, food or supplies. Many, many survivors, particularly those who did not have personal or property insurance, have set up a GoFundMe online donation page.

"A lot of people have chipped in and helped me," Ahqha said. "And I'm really super grateful. But that's kind of the only thing I got going on other than some of these different organizations."

The Sacramento Blues Society recently granted him \$500. And he himself helped raise \$8,000 through a local music and arts nonprofit that put on a multiband fundraiser in Chico's City Plaza. He helped pull together the musicians.

"Every single band was close personal friends of mine — some of the best bands in town. The opening band, particularly, are from Cohasset. They're a bluegrass, country blues band named the Stump Jumpers. Virtually everybody in that band lost their house."

The funds were donated to the Cohasset Community Association, which is helping organize recovery and distributing aid. Ahqha wants to help organize other fundraisers. "We've only got a short window, maybe a year," before people lose interest. "If FEMA doesn't come through in that time, it's a small window of opportunity to try and get as much together as we can."

If FEMA came in, like it did after the Camp Fire destroyed the nearby town of Paradise, his life would immediately be easier. Ahqha had many friends who were affected by the Camp Fire and received thousands of dollars in the form of aid checks from FEMA.

"FEMA came through for pretty much every person, depending on the situation," Ahqha recalled. "That would make a huge difference for me right now."

It could allow him, for instance, to buy a vehicle. His '93 Jeep and '89 Toyota 4runner were lost in the fire. "They're like the best vehicles you'd ever have living in Cohasset," he said wistfully. He and his son drove out his dad's car because it already had some musical equipment in it.

"[Now] I'm still borrowing my dad's car and staying in my parent's house," he said. "So, not an ideal situation. I'm turning 40 this year. I'm like, how has this happened? How has this happened to me? I'm hoping FEMA can get it together. If not FEMA, the state."

In the absence of certain aid, Ahqha relies on personal and community connections and determination.

On the day of band practice, Ahqha had come from an interview for a job promotion. He teaches at a

music store and was hoping to get a management position, to work more hours, make more money, get a vehicle, get his life moving again. But he was passed over for the job.

Prior to the fire, he was in the middle of recording an album, which he planned to use to apply for a SHIFT grant, a program for Indigenous artists that can lead to \$100,000 in funding. Ahqha is a descendant of the Pomo Nation. The loss of his home recording studio and musical equipment, drum sets, mic stands, cables and soundproofing is a major setback.

“I had things all dialed in for me to make things like this grant happen,” he said. “I felt like I was seeing light at the end of the tunnel, like, oh my god, I could really do this and make a living as a musician.”

Still, he is undaunted and playing music. The next fundraising concert will be on Oct. 19 at Maple Creek Ranch in Cohasset.