

Poll reveals what's taking so long with Northern California wildfire rebuild

North Bay Business Journal

Amy Bach started working as an advocate for insurance policyholders in 1984. She became an attorney in 1989 and co-founded United Policyholders in the aftermath of the Oakland Hills firestorm two years later.

The San Francisco-based nonprofit has a network of over 200 volunteer lawyers, insurance professionals and disaster survivors to help homeowners navigate the claims process successfully. Recent disasters the group has been involved with include Superstorm Sandy in New Jersey, Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and fires around San Diego.

A large donation in October allowed the group to start work for North Bay fire victims. It has held four workshops of its own and attended several others, and the group has put on four clinics with one-on-one meetings with lawyers.

Bach is set to be a panelist at North Bay Business Journal's Construction Industry Conference on May 31. She talked to the Journal about why more than two-thirds of North Bay fire victims responding to the group's survey said they hadn't yet received insurance money to rebuild and were underinsured.

What have you found from surveys of victims of the North Bay fires?

Insurance is supposed to be the fuel and the large driver of people's ability to rebuild. And it turns out, it is not performing the way it is supposed to perform.

We conducted a confidential online survey six months from the fires. It closed April 9. We got over 800 responses, which is the best by far we've done after wildfires all over California. The biggest response we received before this was 300.

Results were similar to surveys in previous fires. Eighty percent had not settled the dwelling portion of their insurance claims in how much would be paid. There is not nearly the kind of progress that people think gets made after a disaster.

That confirms what we know: Recovery is a marathon, not a sprint.

The other unfortunate but compelling statistic is that 66 percent said they were underinsured.

Underinsurance has been a big focus of our work after wildfires for our whole 26 years, because it is so chronic and stubborn a problem.

So far, everything we've tried to do doesn't move the needle, because the insurance companies continue to do business exactly the same way they always have. They compete with each other on price, but they do not get the dwelling number right so much of the time.

But it doesn't plague people in peace time. Why does this go on? Because 99.9 percent of the population isn't going to have a total loss, so they won't know they are underinsured.

Forty-seven percent said they were underinsured on their contents.

There were some good news: 63 percent they plan to rebuild, 12 percent said they do not plan to rebuild and 25 percent said they were undecided.

Some say these surveys are self-selecting of people who had a problem. The city and county helped advertise survey as a six-month recovery survey, rather than an insurance survey.

With other fires you've worked with, does that percentage who want to rebuild go up or down?

Some portion of that 25 percent undecided will choose to stay, and I don't want to make it seem like that many will leave. We're still in flux up there in the North Bay): lot values, rumors.

Santa Rosa and the counties of Napa and Sonoma have been trying hard to lower the barriers. They've reduced the permit fees by a lot. Public agencies there have been very diligent in dealing with issues like water, which could easily tip people into not rebuilding.

Compared to a lot of communities where we've offered our Roadmap to Recovery, the North Bay public agencies have been quite responsive.

What have you seen in differences in progress in Sonoma, Napa and Mendocino counties?

Insurance is kind of like a lot of things in life: The squeaky wheel gets paid. There is a certain amount of luck involved in who gets assigned to your claim, which carrier you have and which adjuster you get.

Some of the insurance companies seem like they are doing a better job keeping their customers happier than others, and within some insurance companies, some homeowners are having a better time than others.

It's very common for people to have five different adjusters, and each one has their own personality.

Some will say, "Guesstimate how many book you have." And others will say, "I need the titles of every single book you have, and I need the author." Unfortunately, the claim-settlement process is a little more personality-driven that it should be. We have laws, regulations and rules, but human beings are what they are.

Your legislators got right on top this. Insurance companies make decisions based on business considerations. A well-educated population that's connected and talking to each other, combined with

responsive elected public officials, are collectively putting pressure on insurance companies to waive some rules and expedite some payments. Not for everyone but better than I've seen in past disasters. If you interview 10 people in Coffey Park, you'll likely get 10 different stories on whether they are happy with their insurance company. My observation as a policyholder advocate and working wildfires for three decades, your community is doing much better with their insurance than others I've seen. That's relative to each situation.

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