

Survey shows Fourmile fire victims severely underinsured

United Policyholders

Almost one year after the Fourmile Canyon wildfire devastated mountain communities in Boulder County, only 64 percent of victims surveyed have settled their insurance claim, and for many the settlement will not be enough to rebuild their home.

Other key findings from respondents include:

- 64 percent reported being underinsured on their dwelling by an average of more than \$200,000
- 36 percent have not yet reached a settlement with their insurance company on the dwelling portion of their claim
- 35 percent of respondents will run out of “Additional Living Expense” benefits before they rebuild/replace their home
- 43 percent do not believe a fair value was placed on their possessions
- 65 percent reported they received lowball estimates from their insurance company

United Policyholders, a national nonprofit insurance consumer advocacy group, conducted the survey in partnership with Boulder County. The goal of the survey, taken by 59 households affected by the wildfire, was to identify the status of homeowners’ claims and obstacles to rebuilding and recovery.

The most significant and dramatic recovery obstacle revealed by the survey is underinsurance.

“Underinsurance is a national problem that’s reared its ugly head in Boulder County,” United Policyholders’ Executive Director Amy Bach said. “The gaps in disaster survivors’ coverage are just too large to ignore.”

Garry Sanfacon, Boulder County’s Fourmile Fire Recovery Manager, has seen additional obstacles to people rebuilding. “It was a double whammy,” Sanfacon said. “First you find out you are underinsured and can’t rebuild your home the way it was and then you have to fight the insurance company to receive the limits to your policy you’ve been paying for all these years.”

This has caused the settlement process to be dragged out, which adds stress because many people’s insurance only provides 12 months of Additional Living Expenses to cover rent while you rebuild,

according to Sanfacon. “I think it would be a helpful gesture for insurance companies to extend ALE benefits. It’s almost impossible to settle your claim, design your house and rebuild it in 12 months. Only three property owners have rebuilt and moved into their homes before the one-year anniversary.” Other insurance-recovery problems like lowballing also plague the community. Boulder County resident Bruce Honeyman lost his home to the fire and says his insurance company lowballed him by about 50 percent, refusing for months to accept the actual cost of replacing his home. “The entire process of fighting with them has been so demeaning,” Honeyman said. “I feel like they try to beat people down and force them to submit to the insurance company’s will.”

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