Colleges Fire Up Resources for Their Communities

Question:

Firestorms. Floods. Mega-Hurricanes: What roles can boards and community colleges have in times of natural disasters for their communities?

Answer:

When we look at the role colleges and boards have played in the wildfires across California, community colleges are having a huge impact on their communities. Not only do they serve as centers for community members fleeing imminent danger of firestorms encasing their homes and communities, but community colleges are also often the very institutions that train the courageous firefighters and caretakers whose skills and experience are essential to protect people and property.

As we review the many recent natural disasters, floods in Texas and Louisiana, mega-hurricanes over Florida and Atlantic coastline states, and mega-fires almost out of control in Northern and Southern California, college leaders and boards of trustees are seeing expansion of their roles and responsibilities for their neighborhoods.

Colleges serve as havens for evacuees during disasters. More now than ever with varying climate issues across the continent, the need for well-trained emergency responders, firefighters and well-prepared public servants and community organizations is increasingly urgent. As one former Washington State trustee and state association president, Mauri Shuler, put it, “Colleges deserve the chance to have their stories told. All community colleges in our country need to be prepared for disasters.”

College staff and Board members prepare shelters

Serving as part of an out-of-state Red Cross Volunteer team to assist those in the California wildfires, Shuler contacted

Wine Country Ablaze- Some FACTS about California Wildfires:

- October is high fire season especially with Diablo winds reaching 80 mph.
- Over 41 people were killed in the Northern California wildfires that started October 8, 2017.
- Most of the death and devastation to neighborhoods occurred in the 9 or so hours before dawn, when the multifront fire rampaged unabated.
- Over 11,000 firefighters from around the state and beyond worked the fire lines, including college-trained fire cadets.
- Northern CA: Santa Rosa, Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino, and Yuba counties mandated evacuation orders.
- Southern CA: A month later, Ventura and Los Angeles counties mandated evacuations.
- FEMA offered assistance to fire victims. [www.disasterassistance.gov](http://www.disasterassistance.gov)
- Red Cross organized relief efforts. Evacuees trying to connect with family and friends posted on their Safe and Well website: [www.redcross.org/safewandwell](http://www.redcross.org/safewandwell).
ACCT this past fall to talk about the overwhelming effort that staff from Napa Valley College, Napa, CA, exhibited when she arrived at the College during the massive wildfires devastating Northern California.

“I was blown away with what they had to do at the College to prepare the shelter for community members fleeing the fires. They manned the college 24 hours a day. Every eight hours, a new administrator took a turn at the three college shelters, cleaning and helping with preparations. College staff emptied out rooms to provide space for the community.”

During the evacuation, colleges under imminent danger from nearby fires faced their own problems—some lost internet service, and the HVAC system filled with smoke that had to be cleared away before reopening by a specified date. Contracts had to be rewritten. According to Shuler, “Every single department had major challenges and were solving them with incredible skill and grace.”

In fact, Napa Valley College Superintendent/President, Dr. Ronald Kraft, college staff, coaches and athletic department and Board members helped out at the shelter in the gymnasium. “It was an amazing effort,” Shuler notes.

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**A trustee’s impressions**

**During the crisis:**
- All board members must be prepared to make sure they have ONE point person in charge of the facility and staff assignments.
- They should support the staff by showing up, making sure the staff working round the clock had adequate food, water, etc.
- The Board Chair should be prepared with talking points or appoint the President to speak for the Board... daily, if necessary.

**To help the college ramp up again:**
- Trustee should show up to thank the staff and faculty!
- And simply monitor the work being done by staff and provide very strong moral support.
- Give out some awards. Recognize them at board meetings.
- Wouldn’t hurt to bake some cookies or lasagna for them, too!

- Mauri Shuler, former trustee

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*Students, staff and administrators volunteered to help at Napa Valley Community College’s gymnasium which was used as an evacuation and collection center during the October wildfires disaster in California’s wine country.*
Even though she lives in another state, Shuler was asked to help. “They deployed me to this location when they realized how massive the fire was becoming, and that the entire town of Calistoga was evacuated, meaning hundreds of Spanish speakers would be arriving at the shelter. I am fluent in Spanish.”

Napa Valley College’s three shelters served 780 evacuees, providing food, shelter and supplies during the unpredictable wildfires and mandatory evacuations in October 2017. Photo courtesy of NVC PIO.

**Much help and many quick decisions**

As a former trustee, Shuler noted that in such circumstances, colleges have got to be flexible and make decisions promptly. Help came in all forms. The Police Chief, Ken Arnold, was the first one on the scene after he received word that the College was needed for a shelter. Napa Valley College (NVC) has its own food bank and was mandated to shut down for two weeks.

According to President Kraft, the NVC board individually and collectively were affected by the fires and some had to be evacuated themselves. During the time of uncertainty about the fires, the Board called an emergency meeting and passed a resolution to work with all the different agencies.

Kraft indicated, “We were not completely sure how it would all shake out. The fire path and winds were unknown, and we were surrounded on both sides. A relatively new board, it was their first time doing this, and it was a courageous thing for them to do.” President Kraft later published a detailed article about the community spirit that the Napa Valley College and neighborhood demonstrated during this wildfire event; the article is available as an addendum to issue #12 on the Trustee Talk website.**
Other Colleges Engage

In addition to NVC, Santa Rosa Junior College (SRJC) and Solano Community College (SCC), as well as a handful of other two-year colleges closed because of poor air quality and the erratic nature of the blazes. Dr. Frank Chong, SRJC’s Superintendent/President, emphasized the safety of students, faculty and staff and focused on developing plans for helping those who needed support to begin recovery.

Over 40 shelters were opened during the wildfires. In Napa Valley, people were sleeping in parking lots. The Red Cross and the Salvation Army, and county fire and police worked cohesively with the College which also set up a relief fund to help students get back to school. The Board approved adjusting the exam schedule so that students could graduate on time.

Solano Community College trustee praises College efforts

Quinten Voyce, a trustee for Solano, noted that the College quickly notified the board and posted on social media to make sure the word about college closure got out. Also an evacuation center, the Solano “did a ton of work to make the evacuation center happen and make it run with efficiency, organization, student power and competence,” notes Voyce.

ACCT spoke with Superintendent/President Dr. Celia Esposito-Noy about her college’s role in the fire emergency. As soon as she was notified by the sheriff and the Office of Emergency Services (OES) that Solano was needed, she notified trustees who were very supportive of the college being used as an evacuation center for the neighborhood. “People raved about how they were treated and even joked about us being ‘crews without booze.’ “

“Air quality was the primary reason for relocation of families. Working with OES and Public Health authorities, Esposito-Noy comments that this venture was also about mental health. Some people had the attitude that “Hell, no, we won’t go,” but due to the poor air quality needed to be evacuated. Kaiser gave medical treatment for people, and restaurants donated food and supplies, and the Superintendent/President recalled, “We were mindful to take care of our neighbors; many were in shock.”
Among Uncertainty, Fast Decisions

“You have to get your wits about you. No time to figure it out. We can’t just close the campus down. We must consider all the impacts,” stated Esposito-Noy. Decisions had to be fast, and the board had to deal with the uncertainty to close other college locations. “This was about taking care of our community.” The college was closed for three days because of the uncertainty about the winds, one branch campus a few miles from a major conflagration. Board members and staff also came to help. “The winds were changing by the hour,” noted Esposito-Noy. “We eventually had to shut down all of our locations; even faculty were evacuated to our center. We would start at 4:00 AM and the last person left Sunday evening. It helped to have the OES in charge.”

Strong Partnerships

As an evacuation center for 110 evacuees, Solano was in partnership with the Salvation Army that oversaw food and donations. There were multiple fires in several local areas, and Esposito-Noy reported that initially they really did not have enough people to support the center through the chaos. “Eventually, we did have student leaders, staff and administrators who took over management of the center.”

In retrospect, Esposito-Noy mused, “The comprehensive accreditation team left October 5th and the fire started October 8th. We slept every night at the college, smoke was burning three miles
from the main Fairfield campus. It was pretty devastating. We were very fortunate, however. We even had a professional tennis tournament one week after the evacuation.”

**Southern California Catches Fire Too**

Colleges also help produce firefighters. In December, a month later, the country was shocked to hear again about more devastating fires, this time in Southern California. Many community colleges were closed, yet college fire cadets from Rio Hondo College Wildland Fire Academy joined U.S Forest Service firefighters to battle a series of wildfires near Ventura and Sylmar. (According to a December 13, 2017, *Community College Daily*, all cadets find positions with wildland fire agencies.)

Like the firestorms in the northern part of the state, fires spread quickly for many square miles in Ventura, Santa Barbara and Los Angeles counties. According to Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) Chancellor, Dr. Francisco Rodriquez, three of the nine colleges closed: LA Mission College in Sylmar, closest to one of the fires in the San Fernando Valley, for three days due to hazardous, high-wind conditions and poor air quality; LA Pierce College, for one day due as a precautionary, safety measure; and LA Valley College, for one day due to poor air quality and safety. Also, the December monthly LACCD Board meeting was relocated to the district office due to access and transportation issues caused by one of the fires on the west side. The multiple fires exacerbated traffic congestion along the major corridors all over the county.

![Napa Valley volunteers provide sanctuary to pets fleeing smoke-filled areas during the wildfires. Photo courtesy of NVC PIO.](image)

**College Serves as Animal Sanctuary**

One Los Angeles college played a special role during the fire devastation. LA Pierce College in Woodland Hills, CA is on over 400 acres, with well-established agriculture and veterinary programs that includes an active farm with animals. The LAPC Farm Center served as a sanctuary for over 100 animals from the surrounding area that were rescued and transported for safety
and shelter. The College cooperated with the County of Los Angeles Animal Services. (At Napa Valley College’s evacuation center, many pets were sheltered as well.)

Chancellor Rodríguez also praised his faculty, staff and administrators for their rescue efforts: “At LA Mission College, the faculty, staff and administration responded quickly and did an outstanding job in rescheduling final examinations and support services over the weekend and other days, so that students were not harmed from the college closure.”

Both East and West LA Colleges also offer Fire technology programs. Noting that there are 30 firefighter academies throughout the state, the California Community College Chancellor’s Office also posts an article about fire programs to watch on their website.

Lessons Learned – Training, Coordination and Appreciation

Last year, the Solano Community College’s management made commitment to do National Incident Management Services (NIMS) and Strategic Emergency Management Systems (SIMS) training that had been established since 9/11. Over 40 people, mostly classified managers, were trained, and that training proved helpful during the fire crisis. The coordination with law enforcement was also important as a lifeline for information.

Esposito-Noy also noted that it is important to thank people for their efforts. In the week following the college’s role as an evacuation center, on the college intranet “Inside Solano,” she thanked the Custodial and Grounds staff who worked day and night to keep the facility clean and to make room for cots as evacuees arrived throughout the week and the faculty and staff who helped collect donations and serving food, and caring for evacuees. Trustees were posted every step of the way.”

Help for Students in the Aftermath

Not to be overlooked are the efforts colleges establish to support students and faculty after such calamity to their homes and families. Knowing many students left books in the school, college leaders rescheduled exams and set up support centers and fire relief funds. Housing offers, community resources, as well as air and water quality information were broadly communicated. Extensive resources were added to the Student Health Services webpages.

Most important were consistent communications and providing encouraging words. SRJC advertised in October, “We encourage any faculty staff or students who have been heavily impacted by the fires to contact SRJC for support.” Such actions and words model the compassion and understanding needed by a board and college leaders in such natural disasters.

While this Trustee Talk looks at just a few colleges impacted by the California fires, it is an example of the collaboration and preplanning needed by colleges to serve their communities in emergencies. Being prepared is critical for all safety and security measures to help boards and
community leaders meet their fiduciary responsibility to secure the college and serve their constituents compassionately and effectively.

Disclaimer: This newsletter is offered for general informational purposes only. It is not offered as and does not constitute legal advice.

**For further information, see College Shelters a community in crisis Addendum to Issue # 12 on the Trustee Talk website and a link to pictures of the evacuation center provided by Napa Valley College’s Public Information Office.

Do YOU have a question for us?
To share your story or reaction to the latest issue of Trustee Talk, email: ngoldstein@acct.org.

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