

Wildlife

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In the midst of rebuilding

Progress for those rebuilding runs the gamut.

Mack and her husband have a new house thanks to Christian Aid Ministries. The nonprofit sends volunteers to help survivors rebuild after wildfires, hurricanes, tornados and floods. Recipients are generally underinsured and have a low income, with nowhere else to turn to for help.

Insurance has been a headache for most. One member of the group is facing a deadline, and several members offered help with filing an extension.

If all else fails, someone suggested, play hardball and threaten to sue. One member had to get an attorney to handle her case. She was dropped by her insurance about a year after the wildfires.

Most discovered they were underinsured, that replacement cost coverage — to replace an item without depreciation deduction — isn't all it's made out to be, and that there are caps to what can be claimed.

Glen Kent said they would have gladly paid more money for their insurance if all that had been explained and they understood the ramifications.

He and his wife, Tammy, hope to have their house rebuilt by mid-2023. It took them a year to get a building permit with Marion County, "who promised to cut through all the red tape," Glen told the group. "Marion County has put up one obstacle after another."

It has been more of the same for Amundsen and Roantree, both retired from the U.S. Forest Service. She was a fire lookout. He was a botanist.

They both lost homes in the fires, hers in Detroit and his on North Fork Road. They had been married about four years but kept both residences. They decided to sell her property and build on his.

The first contractor they hired went to jail for criminal charges not related to his work, but permits have been their biggest obstacle.

"I thought maybe a year and things would be settled," Amundsen said. "Then you realize the magnitude of it, and everybody in the same boat trying to rebuild, and then there was COVID."

Since the group's last meeting, the couple was granted a building permit by the Marion County Public Works Building Inspection Division.



Al and Laurie Brooks lost their Niagara home in the Labor Day Wildfires two years ago. They had moved to Niagara in 2018 and opted to buy a nearby house instead of rebuilding. PHOTOS BY BRIAN HAYES/STATESMAN JOURNAL

"Meeting people where they are, providing that level of support and empathy, and being able to offer it from an outreach perspective reduces a lot of barriers for people."

Teri Morgan

Program manager with Marion County Health & Human Services, said.

A helping hand

While the group has its gripes about the county permit process, it has received ongoing support from another department.

Marion County Health & Human Services has been involved in wildfire outreach since the beginning, first at the Oregon State Fairgrounds where residents were evacuated and eventually in the canyon.

"Meeting people where they are, providing that level of support and empathy, and being able to offer it from an outreach perspective reduces a lot of barriers for people," Teri Morgan, a program manager with Marion County Health & Human Services, said.

Since nearly the beginning of the Monday wildfire survivor support group, the county has been providing meals and a certified recovery mentor at each meeting.

"This is such an impressive group," Morgan said. "They are so active in their community and in helping each other. It's really a privilege for us to come alongside and be able to support their efforts in any way we can."

Certified recovery mentors have lived with substance abuse and bring with them experience navigating barriers. They are there to answer questions and provide support as needed. With this group, however, not much is needed.

"This is a great self-directed group, supporting each other and helping each other through barriers as they navigate recovery," Morgan said.

The building where the group meets doesn't have a restroom. When it became a financial strain on the church a couple of months ago to pay for a portable toilet, Marion County picked up the tab.

On Monday, the two-year anniversary of the wildfires, the group will

hold its regular meeting but no one from the county will attend because of the holiday. The county will still provide dinner.

Being together is important to these survivors. They met last year, too, on the first anniversary. They've grown close, like family, with plans to socialize outside of meetings.

The Kirks want to host something at their place around Halloween. The Brooks have been talking about having a barbecue at their Mill City home.

Members also volunteer together. Some are involved with a group that meets on Saturdays and does everything from brush removal to tree planting for fellow wildfire survivors. Others work volunteer shifts at United Way of the Mid-Willamette Valley's Good360 warehouse, a gifts-in-kind program that has helped furnish their new homes.

"It not only helps in a therapeutic way," Al Brooks said, "but we're paying it forward."

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