

Flooding: 'I can see the river from my front room now'

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something resembling normal seemed overwhelming.

Blessedly, they weren't alone. Wohlcke said various individuals, agencies and organizations stepped up to help people harmed by the flood. She ticked off the names of Samaritan's Purse, Team Rubicon, CAPECO, the city and others.

"If it wasn't for those people and all the volunteers, we would have had no sunshine," she said.

She also feels grateful to a local coalition that was created solely because of the flooding — the Blue Mountain Region Long-Term Recovery Group. The name is a mouthful, but the mission is clear.

"Our main goal is to make sure that people return to a safe, sanitary and secure way of life," said Christy Lieuallen, who co-chairs the group and is executive director of United Way of the Blue Mountains. "We're not trying to make them whole again. If we had all the money in the world, we could. But we can't. So we're looking at primary homeowners and returning them to a

safe, sanitary and secure living condition."

The Okanogan County Long Term Recovery Group, which arose to assist victims of the largest wildfire in recorded Washington history in 2014, serves as a model for the Blue Mountain group.

Blue Mountain co-chair David Reinholz said the group serves Umatilla County in Oregon and Walla Walla and Columbia counties in Washington. Lieuallen and Reinholz meet weekly with CAPECO, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, faith-based groups and others, as well as disaster experts from county, state and federal agencies.

Lead case manager Maraena Allen-Lewis heads a team of five case managers. By March, the team's to-do list included investigating over 600 households in Oregon and Washington reported as being impacted by flooding. The case managers observed a great deal of destruction.

"The damage was pretty significant in both Walla Walla and Umatilla counties, but the lion's share of the effects we have seen have been largely



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Debris litters the Wohlckes' street at the Riverview Mobile Home Estates in Pendleton after floodwaters receded on Feb. 8, 2020.

on the Oregon side," Allen-Lewis said. "The majority of those 600 households were in Oregon."

The case managers weeded out those who didn't actually need help or ones who experienced damage to residences that weren't primary. For the majority making the cut, the needs varied greatly, Allen-Lewis said, from assistance with insurance to weatherization.

Case manager Sharon Neuvirth helped the Wohlckes submit a successful appeal to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for additional assis-

tance, which allowed the couple purchase a stove insert for heat.

Each case has its own unique twist. One family with several young children had a heating and cooling system destroyed in the flood.

"They had no way of covering that cost themselves so we were able to help them out by getting someone out there to assist and figure out what a new HVAC system would entail, and then support them financially by getting a new energy-efficient HVAC system installed in the home," she said.

Another family found

themselves displaced.

"With the support of one of our case managers, they were able to locate an apartment," Allen-Lewis said. "Our unmet needs table was able to provide the finances to cover the cost of the security deposit and two months of rental assistance for them so they could be secure and safe in that home."

The "unmet needs table," one of many working parts, is a collection of organizations with manpower, money and materials to meet needs of disaster survivors. Another committee provides spiritual and emotional support. Still another recruits, trains and coordinates volunteers.

"We're looking for volunteers, who once COVID restrictions have lifted can do everything from picking up rocks to helping put insulation back under trailers to building fence," Lieuallen said. "We have projects lined up and we definitely need volunteers."

So far, case managers have closed about 280 of the original cases, are actively working 130 more, and will soon focus on remaining households.

Reinholz is already looking ahead to the area's next

disaster. He hopes the Blue Mountain Region Long-Term Recovery Group will play an even bigger role next time.

"We need to convince a whole lot of other people that we are a player in this thing," he said. "The long-term recovery group needs to be at the table with emergency management, with state and with the feds, so we can all respond effectively right from the get-go."

He encouraged people seeking help or wanting to volunteer or donate to go to the group's website: www.uwbluemt.org/content/flood-recovery.

The Wohlckes are getting close to having their previous life back. After months in a camp trailer, the couple is back home working on remaining repairs. They have a better view of the river now, the result of some brush-clearing work there. Connie said she'll be keeping her eye on the water, especially since snow blanketed her neighborhood and the surrounding mountains with snow.

"I can see the river from my front room now," she said. "I'm a little worried."

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