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Charities' coffers swell to \$23 million - and counting

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Major nonprofits have collected more than \$23 million for wildfire relief in what some are predicting will become the largest local charity drive ever.

The American Red Cross has collected \$17.3 million in contributions for Southern California wildfires, most of which it said will go to San Diego County. And millions more has been donated and pledged to The San Diego Foundation, the Salvation Army, the Jewish Community Foundation and others.

Many nonprofits are still collecting money while they forge a long-range plan on how to best spend the contributions.

Next month, The San Diego Foundation is scheduled to release an assessment on wildfire-relief needs. The foundation, the United Way and other organizations said they will base their spending on the report.

In addition, a local association of nonprofits affiliated with the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster is coordinating fire-relief charity work among themselves to prevent double-dipping and duplication of services.

Money has been disbursed and will continue to be directed toward some obvious areas, such as housing and meals. But the contributions could also help the agricultural industry, the environment and wildlife.

Federal statistics show that more than 93 percent of people whose homes were destroyed in the wildfires are insured. But that doesn't mean they won't have emotional and financial needs, said Sara Wilensky Napoli of The San Diego Foundation.

"Parents may have to use money set aside for college funds they set up for their children, so we could look at setting up funds for college," Napoli said.

The San Diego Foundation reassembled a team from the 2003 fire relief effort and tapped civic leaders and volunteers who worked on the Cedar fire recovery.

The foundation has received more than \$6 million in donations and commitments for its After-the-Fires Fund. Of that, \$4.6 million has been collected.

The foundation has awarded \$180,178 in grants from its After-the-Fires Fund 2007. Almost half went to fire departments for equipment damaged during the blazes. About \$24,500 went for cots used in emergency shelters, and \$20,000 was designated for the La Jolla Indian Reservation, which was devastated by the Poomacha fire.

Some nonprofits, including the Red Cross, have stopped soliciting donations. Others said they will continue to

accept contributions through the year or until they taper off.

Fueled by powerful Santa Ana winds, the series of wildfires began Oct. 21 and forced 600,000 residents from their homes. The fires killed at least 10 people and destroyed more than 1,700 homes.

The overwhelming generosity by residents and businesses has surprised even the most experienced charity leaders.

“We have a strong obligation to donors and to survivors to do this right,” said Don Read, president of Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters and chief of emergency disaster services for the Salvation Army San Diego.

The Red Cross will use all of its wildfire donations on relief efforts. If donations exceed the cost of relief, the organization would return the money to donors, said Joe Craver, interim chief executive officer of the San Diego/Imperial Counties American Red Cross.

According to early estimates, the local Red Cross relief effort is expected to cost \$13 million to \$15 million.

The United Way of San Diego County included wildfire relief in its fundraising drive this year, in part because donors complained they didn't have that option during the 2003 wildfires, said Doug Sawyer, the organization's president and chief executive officer.

So far, the organization has raised \$236,000 for wildfire efforts. But that doesn't include money raised through major campaigns, such as payroll deductions and widespread mailers. A tally of those donations is expected in the spring.


If there is a downside to the strong show of charity since the fires, it might be at the smaller nonprofits that rely on seasonal holiday fundraising. SPORTS For Exceptional Athletes, a new organization that offers sports to disabled athletes and their families, sent out 10,000 mailers a day before the fires began. A little more than a dozen people responded.

“All people are thinking about is helping people who lost homes in the fires,” executive director Walter Jackson said. “If we want to keep going, we have to get donations now. This could be devastating for us.”

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