

On the COVER

California Wildfire Response

Cover Photo by Thomas D. Kirsch, MD, MPH, Director of Operations, Department of Emergency Medicine, Johns Hopkins University

In October 2007 wildfires raced through the hills of southern California. The fires cut through a large swath of San Diego and San Bernardino Counties, from isolated rural areas to middle-class suburbs to large estates. Over the course of 48 hours, more than 200,000 people were displaced from their homes under mandatory evacuation orders. In excess of 500,000 acres (775 mi²) burned, and more than 2000 homes were destroyed. The cover photo shows the complete devastation of a home in eastern San Diego County outside Dulzura. Seven people were directly killed by the fires, and another 7 died from related events.



The American Red Cross responded immediately, setting up emergency shelters and feeding centers throughout the county. As a part of that response I led a team of public health and emergency experts to assess the health and safety issues of the people affected. We traveled throughout the county conducting surveys of the families in shelters and those seeking aid at the local assistance centers in San Diego County. Local assistance centers were county-administered centers that offered a range of recovery services for individuals affected by the disaster. Representatives from county, state, and federal agencies, as well as the private sector and voluntary organizations such as the Red Cross, worked at these centers to assist individuals with recovery. Most of the people at these centers and particularly those in the shelters, who were already poor, lost everything. Many had been forced to evacuate multiple times as the fires raced through the county. Many were Spanish-speaking only. Those that were undocumented immigrants had the fewest recovery resources available to them. In spite of the loss, everybody was eager to get back and restart their lives.