DISASTER RECOVERY BLUEPRINT FOR PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATIONS

Lessons learned after the 2018 Camp Fire in Northern California
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INTRODUCTION

Why this report and who is it for?

The Camp Fire hit Butte County, Calif., on Nov. 8, 2018. It did almost all of its fire damage in a single day. Eighty-five people died. Nearly 14,000 homes were destroyed. Damage was estimated at $16.5 billion. It remains the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California history.

No area would have been prepared to respond to a disaster of this magnitude, especially a rural area like Butte County. Local governments were overwhelmed. The federal government was, too. So local nonprofit organizations stepped up to lead the relief and recovery effort. The North Valley Community Foundation, buoyed by millions of dollars in donations to help fire survivors, became the lead philanthropic organization in the response effort.

We created a sort of response and recovery playbook on the fly. It wasn’t easy. We learned a lot. We’ve utilized those lessons again and again to respond to subsequent, seemingly endless wildfire disasters each summer and fall. And we’ve been asked by other community foundations, relief and social service organizations, and even government agencies to help inform their efforts.

That’s the goal of this publication — to share the lessons, the successes and failures, to let you know what to expect if you’re forced into a role you never expected for your organization. We want you to have the lessons we learned.
2018 Camp Fire Summary

On Nov. 8, 2018, Butte County endured the most devastating wildfire in California history.

**Total...**

- People displaced: 52,000
- Direct deaths: 85
- Homes destroyed: 13,861
- Acres burned: 153,335
- Schools damaged or destroyed: 8 of 9
- Students displaced: 4,500

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**Estimates of damaged and destroyed structures**

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<th>Destroyed</th>
<th>Total by type</th>
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Photo by NASA

Photo by US Forest Service
CAMP FIRE FUNDING SNAPSHOT
(As of February 2022)

Total raised: $72,736,832

Grants awarded by category

- Health & Wellness: 27.4% ($13,875,659)
- Housing: 25% ($12,637,018)
- Community Development: 8.3% ($4,183,849)
- Direct Assistance: 28.6% ($14,445,659)
- Economic Recovery: 3.4% ($1,752,866)
- Emergency Response: 7.3% ($3,680,757)
Prior to the 2018 Camp Fire, NVCF operated as a small community foundation with $27 million in assets. Our operation was nimble with a mix of donor-advised funds, social entrepreneurs and community advocates raising funds for small projects. The nature of being nimble and flexible allowed us to be adaptable and responsive. The following are lessons learned so foundations can be prepared for unknown challenges.

**Identify a disaster response team.**

Setting up a board and staff structure to be responsive will ensure your team is prepared to meet unknown challenges. This includes a disaster response subcommittee of the board with 3-5 members and a staff team that includes fundraising, grantmaking and public communications. This team could expand when long-term priorities are set.

**Prepare to act quickly.**

Making responsive grants in an emergency requires setting a clear process to activate quickly. Knowing organizations and agencies that respond in disasters, where designated evacuation centers will be, who your internal team will be and having clear guidelines and polices in place will inform your actions in an emergency.

**Update fundraising and grantmaking platforms.**

Now is a good time to update your online fundraising platforms and grantmaking software. Establishing clear and easy ways for donors to give as well as for grantees to let you know their needs will alleviate additional strain and capacity in the event of a disaster.

**Keep it simple and flexible.**

Streamline your application process. Building trust and community engagement now will help ensure funds are stewarded well. Due diligence is important, but often in order to be effective in disasters, built-in flexibility is needed to adapt to unforeseen circumstances.

**Help others establish funds.**

As a community foundation, be ready to establish specific funds requested by businesses, government entities and community groups. Many groups and organizations will want to direct their fundraising to benefit specific groups of individuals impacted by the disaster. For example, a business may want to set up a fund to help employees impacted by the disaster. An absolutely critical guide for such funds is the IRS publication 3833 - “Disaster Relief: Providing Assistance Through Charitable Organizations” at https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p3833.pdf
Emergency Response
Duration: Nov. 8, 2018 through March 1, 2019 (4 months)

Roughly 52,000 people were evacuated from their homes. Ten shelters were organized and opened. Urgent needs were identified with an emphasis on providing basic needs like food, shelter, medical supplies, communication and transportation. Survivors were not allowed to return to their properties for several weeks and basic infrastructure would take months to restore before people could return. The last shelter closed on March 1, 2019.

Our Role

• Opened the Camp Fire Relief Fund the morning of the fire. Reached out to community foundations and philanthropy partners describing the need and to learn from their experience.

• Assessed immediate needs through visits to shelters and the disaster recovery centers.

• Hosted the long-term recovery group, became a fiscal sponsor and participated on the board of directors.

• Convened local, regional and state funders.

• Issued responsive grants to shelters and organizations addressing immediate needs.

• Ensured we were available and responsive to receiving donations rapidly.
Immediate Recovery

**Duration:** Jan. 1, 2019 through Dec. 31, 2019 (1 year)

The sheer magnitude of the destruction and a wet winter meant the cleanup was lengthy. A year after the fire, crews had removed more than 3.66 million tons of ash, debris, metal, concrete and contaminated soil. The year was spent planning and strategizing for long-term recovery.

**Our Role**

- Created the Butte Strong Fund as the vehicle for our collaborative funding model, combining the three largest funding efforts.
- Transitioned from emergency response to planning for long-term recovery.
- Assessed needs and priorities for long-term recovery.
- Convened discussions on housing and health and wellness.
- Overhauled our grant guidelines including a reset of our priorities and strategy.
- Identified organizations, their roles and capacity and key leaders in recovery, then focused our grantmaking on building organizational capacity in those critical to recovery efforts.

Long-term Recovery and Resilience

**Duration:** Jan. 1, 2020 through present (3-5 years)

Recovery after a disaster always takes longer than expected. It’s important to focus on long-term recovery as much as emergency relief or there wouldn’t be funding to do the necessary and more expensive long-term recovery.

**Our Role**

- Developed strategic annual portfolios on long-term recovery focused on housing and wellness.
- Transitioned from emergency response to planning for long-term recovery.
Strengthening the Safety Net

The California Community Foundation, in partnership with North Valley Community Foundation, commissioned csb philanthropic solutions to develop a landscape analysis of the social safety net in Butte County before and after the Camp Fire and identify opportunities for increasing its responsiveness, impact and sustainability.

The social safety net is defined as the range of government and nonprofit services, including food, shelter, housing, health care, behavioral health, case management, workforce development and financial assistance available to lower-income and vulnerable populations.

This report served as a guiding document for funders to understand the myriad issues facing the recovery and provide solid recommendations with opportunities to strengthen the safety net in the region.

North Valley Community Foundation

Report: Strengthening the Safety Net in Butte County

Start Date: Feb. 28, 2019 (3 months after the fire)
Consultant: Cassandra Benjamin, csb consulting
Release Date: Aug. 2, 2019
Collaborators: California Community Foundation, North Valley Community Foundation

BUILDING CAPACITY

Internal capacity

• Initial emergency response grant-making committee.
• Established collaborative Butte Strong Fund and appointed committee members.
• Allocated funding from the Camp Fire Relief Fund to the Butte Strong Fund.

• Draft grant guidelines with recommendations to the citizens committee.
• Solicits grant applications, which are submitted electronically.
• Program officers work with applicants on how to improve grant requests or let them know if applications are not viable. Committee meets weekly to vet, discuss and make recommendations to the Butte Strong committee.
• Grants of $50,000 and under are considered by the internal committee.
• Grants over $50,000 are considered by the Butte Strong Fund citizens committee.

• Approves grant guidelines and grant priorities.
• Meets monthly to discuss, approve or deny applications, or send requests back to applications for follow-up questions.
• Provides informed counsel on challenges and opportunities within grant guidelines.

• Program staff: Works with applicant to get signed grant agreements.
• Finance: Distributes grant funding to applicants.
• Communications: Publicizes every grant on website, social media and in press release.
• Program staff: Reviews grant reports from applicants, usually 6-12 months later.

BUTTE STRONG GRANT COMMITTEE

Chuck Rough, former Paradise town manager
Anna Bauer, executive director, First 5 Commission
Scott Lotter, former Paradise mayor
Carol Peterson, former publisher of the Paradise Post
Don McNelis, former Butte County Office of Education superintendent
Geoffrey Chinnock, financial manager, Morrison
Greg Webb, developer and philanthropist
Peggy Moak, former Butte County treasurer-tax collector
Farshad Azad, board chair, North Valley Community Foundation
Sierra Grossman, second generation owner, Sierra Nevada Brewing Co.
Community Capacity

Disasters often require communities to work together on a scale they have not had to in the past. Organizations and agencies may need to expand staff, update the systems they created to be able to handle more and focus on what they are good at while relying on the strengths of others. People and organizations need to move from simply coordinating efforts to learning the skills needed for true collaboration.

Incubated a long-term recovery group.

A week after the fire, NVCF hosted roundtable discussions with individuals and organizations who were responding to the critical needs of survivors. The roundtable transformed into a long-term recovery group, incubated at the foundation. NVCF used this collaborative to urge grantees to participate and strengthen the collective impact of organizations and agencies working together with a shared purpose.

Participating Organizations (2022)

3CORE, Inc.  NorthStar  North Valley Community Foundation  Northern Valley Catholic Social Service  Paradise Alliance Church  Paradise Adventist Church  Paradise Community Guilds  Rebuild Paradise  Regenerating Paradise  Resilience Resources  The Rural Services Network  St. Vincent de Paul of Los Angeles  Tzu Chi Foundation  United Way of Northern California  Valley Contractors Exchange  Youth for Change  United Methodist Committee On Relief  Alliance for Workforce Development  Butte County Art on Wheels  Boys & Girls Club of the North Valley  Butte College  Chico Area Interfaith Council  Caring Choices, Inc.  Cascade Orthopedic Supply  CES Weddings & Events  Chico Builders Association  Church of Scientology Mission of Chico  Community Action Agency of Butte County  Center for Spiritual Living Chico  GRID Alternatives North Valley  Golden Valley Bank  Chico Hillel  Oroville Hope Center  The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints  Jesus Center
Community Capacity

Invested in increased capacity of community organizations and agencies.

A cornerstone of our grantmaking during the months after the fire, NVCF awarded grants to organizations to increase their capacity based on their strengths and role within the collective recovery process. Organizations needed to expand their staff, upgrade their systems and deepen their skill sets to meet the overwhelming needs the recovery would require.

Convened multiple stakeholders around sector-specific challenges.

With nearly 14,000 homes destroyed and tens of thousands of people displaced, our community needed to come together and take strategic action around housing and health and wellbeing. NVCF brought together major stakeholders across multiple counties to lay a roadmap to address these critical challenges.

Provided training to increase the skills organizations needed to adapt to disaster recovery.

Organizations, agencies and businesses needed new skill sets to address the impact of the fire. The NVCF funded and provided training to be sure that our community had a shared framework that was trauma-informed.
Collaborative Funding Model

As the philanthropic hub for the Camp Fire recovery, NVCF created a collaborative of funders to leverage resources and help connect outside funders with our extensive network of nonprofits and agencies leading the recovery efforts. We received funds directly for the response and recovery and worked with other funders who wanted to grant to specific projects by connecting them with trusted and vetted initiatives critical to the recovery efforts.

Created the Butte Strong Fund.

The Butte Strong Fund combined the three largest funding efforts (NVCF, Sierra Nevada Brewing Co. and the Aaron Rodgers Fire Recovery Fund). Butte Strong Fund priorities and efforts then attracted other large-scale donors, such as Wells Fargo, the California Community Foundation and American Red Cross. Wells Fargo donated $3.25 million that helped both the Butte Strong Fund and other regional recovery efforts get on a firm early footing.

Convened multiple funding partners to understand needs and opportunities.

In the intermediate phase of recovery, hosting a group of local, regional and national funders gives each organization the shared resources and relationships to make effective decisions. We found it helpful to invite funders to site visits to see and hear personally from those on the front lines of recovery. Monthly calls were organized to give funders opportunities to engage as efforts and initiatives unfolded.
Days after the fire, Sierra Nevada Brewing Co. established the Resilience Butte County Proud IPA project—a joint brewing effort for breweries nationwide to raise funds for the Camp Fire recovery efforts. Sierra Nevada supplied a base recipe and asked its suppliers to donate ingredients to the more than 1,400 participating brewers with the request that 100 percent of each pint sold would be donated to the recovery. Through this project, Sierra Nevada raised over $8.4 million and joined the North Valley Community Foundation and Aaron Rodgers NorCal Fire Recovery Fund to create the Butte Strong Fund, a joint effort of our region’s three largest fundraising campaigns.

Second generation owner Sierra Grossman became actively engaged in the Camp Fire Collaborative and sits on the granting committee of the Butte Strong Fund. This partnership became the cornerstone of how NVCF has engaged the recovery efforts—together, for the long run.

Created one application for multiple funders.

Eliminating barriers for grantees becomes important in order to empower them to focus on the strengths they bring to the recovery effort. NVCF created one application portal shared with multiple funders with an NVCF program officer as the intermediary. This eliminated the need for grantees to fill out multiple applications with potentially multiple interviews.

Created a streamlined funding process.

As proposals were shared, funders often opted to direct their funds to NVCF to manage the disbursement process. Some funded the grantee directly. Providing a streamlined process of funding to grantees allows them to focus on their services.

Shared reporting and impact.

Philanthropic organizations have a mandate to steward their funds well. Specific outcomes and expectations should be articulated in a shared grant agreement with one report that is distributed to multiple funding partners.

Volunteers with VROC work on a home for Camp Fire survivors. (Photo by David Little, NVCF)
Set clarity on criteria.
Get the selection of criteria as complete as possible — setting that criteria sets the stage for all of us to make critical decisions. Setting the criteria was critical itself. It was well structured.

Outline informed guidelines.
We developed grant priorities and guidelines based on hours of interviews and conversations with community leaders well-acquainted with the needs and characteristics of the communities we served. Take the time to listen to the needs of the community and then craft a grantmaking portfolio around these informed needs while also being adaptable throughout the process.

Take time.
You can be quick and effective with your grantmaking, but take the time to carefully vet the experience and capacity grantees have to make a meaningful and effective impact. This also includes taking time to vet consultants and contractors you might bring on.

Know what you do and do it well.
There is a constant and urgent desire to help in times of crisis. The needs are vast and deep. Community foundations are experienced in raising funds, convening community leaders and grantmaking. Do these really well — not rushed, but in a thoughtful and deliberate way.

Take the long road.
If you are a local community foundation, you likely will be one of the last funders standing in the long-term recovery. Leverage the resources of disaster relief organizations. While emergency response certainly has its place, be strategic about your grantmaking with the view of three to five years ahead. There certainly will be urgent needs then, after all others have moved on to another emergency.

CRITERIA
Projects and initiatives were evaluated by the following criteria:

- Projects that target vulnerable populations with a clear Camp Fire connection.
- Projects that result in significant outputs and outcomes with demonstrable impact.
- Applicants who collaborate with other organizations and stakeholders to maximize impact and minimize duplication.
- Applicants who demonstrate their organizational capacity to implement the proposed project in terms of leadership, staffing expertise and financial health.
- The leverage and sustainability of a project, financially feasible with a realistic and viable strategy for sustainability through other ongoing sources of funding.
Emergency response grants $3.6 M

**Emergency Shelter**  
$500,000

In the early days of the fire, NVCF gave up to $10,000 to all organizations that established an immediate emergency shelter. Larger grants for emergency shelters were also awarded as additional emergency shelter capacity emerged and populations with special housing needs were identified.

**Disaster**  
$2.4 million

Social workers identified families that were uninsured or underinsured, providing assistance which included food, gas cards, gift cards, help with rent or deposits on a home, tools for contractors and much more. Through the county’s social services department, direct assistance helped survivors find stable housing.

**Education & Youth Services**  
$500,000

With all schools in the county shut down for the three weeks following the first day of the fire, NVCF coordinated with the Butte County Office of Education and distributed funds to child care providers, after-school programs and the schools themselves.

**Animal Services**  
$195,000

Grants were made to organizations such as the North Valley Animal Disaster Group, Butte Humane Society, Paradise Animal Control and Shelter, Bidwell Wildlife Rehabilitation and many more to help with thousands of displaced pets — dogs, cats, horses, snakes, turtles and more.
Long-term recovery

Multiple studies have shown that disaster recovery is not equal and that vulnerable populations have greater needs, fewer options and longer recovery time frames. One of our objectives in grantmaking is to fill the gaps and leverage resources of government agencies, insurance proceeds and other funding sources.

Housing

Projects that help displaced families settle into affordable housing to provide stability. Housing not only helps family stability, but it also aids local communities and businesses by providing a stable workforce. Long-term recovery ensures that all residents have temporary and then permanent places to live.

Health & Wellness

The impact of sudden changes in population redistribution had a big impact on health and wellness for the community as a whole. Stress levels were high, and trauma widespread. Long-term grantmaking aimed to address community-wide impacts on nutrition and mental, spiritual and emotional well-being.

Direct Assistance

In addition to direct cash assistance through organizations providing aid and care to fire survivors, other forms of assistance included help with rent or deposits on a home, grants for building permits and infrastructure repairs to septic systems—help that would get people into stable and sustainable housing.

Community Development

Rebuilding a community entails rebuilding the very symbols that represent the community. The Butte Strong Fund identified places that are near and dear to the community’s spirit. This could be through long-term planning, rebuilding areas that are key to the community’s identity (new and old) to restore a sense of normalcy and hope.

Economic & Workforce

Small-business owners are the heart of a community, and we needed to get them back on their feet. The Butte Strong Fund identified opportunities to provide a broad range of services to impacted businesses and to advocate for business recovery, resilience and growth.
Some grant examples

Here are brief summaries highlighting just a few of the hundreds of grants we awarded after the Camp Fire. See a complete list at https://www.nvcf.org/buttestrongfund-fundedprojects.

United Policyholders
Several grants supported the nonprofit organization that advocates for fire survivors. United Policyholders hosts an online Camp Fire resource library and provides clinics and events, including a virtual pro bono financial decision-making clinic, a virtual pro bono legal clinic for the underinsured and assistance with the ongoing PG&E Fire Victims Trust distribution process.

Hope Crisis Response Network
Volunteers from all over the United States and Canada come to Paradise to rebuild homes but they struggle to find places to stay because housing is tight. This grant helped the Hope Crisis Response Network turn a former retirement home into a dormitory for volunteers.

Rebuild Incentive Program
A grant to the town of Paradise and county government reduces building fees by up to $3,500 for Camp Fire survivors who want to rebuild.
First Responders Wellness Initiative
A grant helped the Butte County Sheriff’s Office develop and operate a health and wellness program for police and firefighters from throughout the county, focusing on counseling and wellness activities.

Student Trauma Response and Recovery
A grant of more than $2 million helped provide additional counselors for all Butte County schools. The counseling was available for students, staff and families.

Paradise Alliance Church dinners
Grants funded weekly community dinners at Paradise Alliance Church. After the fire, when there were few full-time residents in Paradise, the weekly gatherings were much more than just a meal. It was a way to rebuild a sense of community and reduce isolation for some survivors.

Spring Valley School playground
After the Camp Fire forced Concow School to close, students from Concow were relocated to Spring Valley School, which had been closed since 2010 due to declining enrollment and fell into disrepair from lack of use. One of the items at the top of the wish list for the reopened school was a playground, and a grant from the Butte Strong Fund and the Aaron Rodgers NorCal Fire Recovery Fund at NVCF made that possible.

Art as therapy
Grants to the Butte County Office of Education established a program that places trauma-informed teaching artists in schools impacted by the Camp Fire.

Paradise school activities
Various grants from the Butte Strong Fund helped provide continuity for students completing the school year after the Camp Fire. Grants paid for such things as field trips, graduation celebrations and to replace yearbooks that students lost in the fire.
Parks and trails
A grant to the Paradise Recreation and Park District helped the district develop planning and development documents for the system’s future. The grant helped PRPD apply for and win $5.2 million in funding to develop Lakeridge Park and trails in Magalia.

Iconic landmarks
Two rounds of community development requests resulted in 15 grants averaging more than $88,000 apiece. The grants pumped money into projects to build, rebuild or repair community landmarks and gathering places. Recipients of the grants include well-known sites like the Honey Run Covered Bridge, Gold Nugget Museum, Paradise Performing Arts Center and the Welcome to Paradise sign.

Planning and development
Two separate grants allowed the town of Paradise and Butte County to produce extensive community planning documents.

Business Assistance Fund
A grant to the business assistance group 3CORE provided help for affected businesses on the ridge.

Rediscover the Ridge
A grant to the Youth on the Ridge Community Foundation provided funding for a video series and public relations initiative designed to draw visitors and homeowners to the ridge.

Mobile Training Force
A grant funded this program by Valley Contractors Exchange to recruit new workers and develop skills of existing workers to help fill a gaping need for skilled workers in building trades such as electricians, plumbers and concrete finishers.
Disaster case management

A coordinated disaster case management system is a necessity after large-scale disasters, but don’t expect the government to provide adequate help in all instances. After the Camp Fire, with thousands of people on the waiting list to get help, we realized there weren’t nearly enough case managers. So we stepped in, along with many other nongovernmental organizations, to see where we could help.

More than 8,000 households were on the waiting list for case managers at one point. The Federal Emergency Management Agency funded 16 disaster case manager positions. Because each case manager can take on roughly 30 cases at a time, that meant roughly 480 cases could be handled at once.

Cases can take several months to close. Fire survivors rightfully felt abandoned because they were on the waiting list for months. That’s when philanthropy and community-based organizations stepped up to help.

The Camp Fire Collaborative coordinated the entire system. Ten agencies employed disaster case managers. The system employed 100 case managers and 25 supervisors at its peak. Donations to NVCF and the Butte Strong Fund paid for 79 of those positions.

13 Number of households on the waiting list for disaster case management at its peak (June 2020).
100 Peak number of disaster case managers.
16 Disaster case managers funded by FEMA.
79 Disaster case managers funded by donations to NVCF and the Butte Strong Fund.
10 Agencies that employed disaster case managers.

Thirteen organizations provided funding for those survivors in the case management system. NVCF was the largest funder, with $10.5 million committed to help build the system and then provide funding for survivors.

Learn more about the case management system, what case managers do and read three stories about survivors who went through the system at nvcf.org/disaster-case-management.
Unmet needs

In the first few months after the Camp Fire, we and other nonprofits funded emergency assistance for fire survivors. These grants were awarded to nonprofits working with fire survivors and would help with essential, short-term needs like emergency housing, food and clothing.

The disaster case management system supported fire survivors by developing and helping achieve long-term recovery plans.

Case managers steer clients to various types of help, but cases are often resolved in front of one of two committees.

SIMPLE UNMET NEEDS

The most common route for case managers is to address the weekly Simple Unmet Needs Committee meeting, coordinated by the Camp Fire Collaborative. In that meeting, case managers share details on their request for funding support. After all of the week’s cases are presented, the funders talk over the cases and decide the level of support they can provide. That committee initially consisted of three funders — NVCF, American Red Cross and United Way.

COMPLEX UNMET NEEDS

The cases in front of the Simple Unmet Needs Committee generally are limited to about $15,000. Anything more than that goes to the Complex Unmet Needs Committee, which consists of 13 funding organizations — NVCF, American Red Cross, United Way, Sierra Nevada Resiliency Fund, Bidwell Presbyterian, Community Action Agency, Golden Valley Bank, Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Social Services, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, St. John’s Episcopal, United Methodist Committee on Relief and Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.
Communicating through disaster

Be transparent.
Announce every dollar and every grant. Put those announcements on your website and on social media in real time, as they are approved. Include short descriptions detailing the purpose of the grant. Make it searchable. Months and years later, it will serve as an effective history book of all your organization did.

Thank donors,
if they’ll allow it. We had a big fake check, four feet wide, and if someone would drop off a donation, we’d fill in the large replica check, pose with them in a photo and post it on Facebook while tagging their organization. Not only did the donors appreciate it, but it also encouraged others to donate.

Overcommunicate with your local media.
Send out press releases after every round of funding. Send out press releases about special projects you are funding. Tip off reporters and editors to good stories they can do on their own.

Don’t forget regional and national media, too.
If it’s a story with extended reach, pitch stories beyond your usual channels.

Overexplain,
on your website, on social channels, in press releases, in interviews. Let the public know how to apply for a grant, how grants are vetted, who plays a part in the approval process and what role you play in distributing the grant funds.

Cultivate and thank the largest donors, over and over.
While some donors gave one time, there were many that gave again and again as new needs came to light.
THE DAY THE FIRESTORM CAME

How NVCF transformed overnight

By Alexa Benson-Valavanis, NVCF president and CEO

There was a dark plume in the sky above the mountains a few miles away. The forest and the little rural towns below it were ablaze. First responders were racing in. Everyone else was racing out. Everyone who could.

My grandmother couldn’t. At 93 years old she would need help getting out. It was 10:30 a.m. on Nov. 8, 2018.

One hour before that I called Logan Todd, our director of grants and communications. Logan, and the other six part-time team members at NVCF, were about to do something extraordinary as the forest burned and the ash, smoke and trauma took over our place in the world. They would help transform NVCF into a disaster relief and recovery organization. We would lead the philanthropic response for the most destructive and deadliest wildfire in California history.

No one could have been ready for what was about to happen, but we were a team trained to adapt quickly, innovate and serve. We had a culture built on love.

Logan and I discussed what little we knew of the situation. We decided to activate a charitable relief fund. This was something NVCF had done during many national and international disasters. In all prior circumstances our role was to create a charitable fund for local community members to donate to, then identify the appropriate disaster relief organization or community foundation on the ground and get them the financial support.

The disaster recovery efforts we’d supported in our past included tragedies as far away as the Indonesian tsunami, Hurricanes Harvey and Katrina, as well as dozens of regional and statewide fires like the one that ravaged Napa in 2017. The difference this morning was, the disaster was here. We were the community foundation on the ground.

Over the next few months, we would raise and deploy tens of millions of dollars for both immediate emergency relief and long-term recovery. We would build programs and systems to address the major gaps in our regional, state and federal responses to a crisis of this proportion. And, we would figure out how to do that with just seven employees and a handful of dedicated board members, with no operational endowment or savings account to tap into.

Photo by David Little, Enterprise-Record
At 10:30 a.m. on Nov. 8, a mere five hours after the fire started, we announced to the local community via Facebook and Twitter that the Wildfire Relief Fund was open. The fire wasn’t named yet. As humanitarians we were responding with gut instincts. NVCF was wired for this.

We knew if people were to be evacuated, the shelters would need support. We’d been through the Oroville spillway crisis the year before. We knew that when tens of thousands (or in that case about 188,000 people) are displaced, the local shelters bear a herculean task. We’d helped them then, and we would help again if it turned out people had to leave home.

It turned out everyone had to leave home. It turned out the entire Ridge was on fire or in danger of it. It turned out 85 precious human lives and thousands of animals would perish. It all turned out to be a nightmare.

But we didn’t know that at the moment. It was 11:30 a.m. and my mother and I were holed up at McDonald’s (the closest point we could get to) at the base of the Skyway. We couldn’t get my grandmother out. Eventually, we learned a neighbor was going door to door checking for people who needed assistance out. He had my grandmother. He would take her down the Skyway. His home would be on fire a few hours later and gone by nightfall.

I left McDonald’s and made my way through the congested Chico streets to the North Valley Community Foundation office downtown. Sirens pierced the air. The plume loomed. I prayed. Information was slowly making its way down the mountain, and it was dire.

Everyone on my team was at the office. Chris Hayashida-Knight, Bill Hubbard, Carolyn Engstrom, Courtney Brown, our intern Tatiana Briggs, Logan and now me. When I was hired to rebuild the foundation in 2005, I had no staff, a handful of clients and an annual budget of $35,000. But, after 13 years of grit and service we’d become the place where community members went with a buck or a dream to change the world. We had successfully opened 450 funds, engaged thousands of community members and brought in $75 million before the morning the firestorm hit. This precious team was about to bring in $70 million in the next 12 months.

By midday, our phones were ringing nonstop. People needed help. Shelters were opening and filling up just as quickly. Our fund had been shared hundreds of times on Facebook since our 10:30 a.m. post and now people everywhere were calling for assistance.

We started to gather information about the individual shelters and their availability. We began posting real-time information on our website about resources for the tens of thousands of people fleeing the forest and landing in Chico, Oroville and beyond. We’d never imagined playing a role like this but no system was in place to tell this many people where to go.
By dinnertime we’d talked to, emailed or Facebook messaged thousands of evacuees. Why wasn’t there a system in place for this? This would be the first of many things we would do during the disaster because no one else would or could.

By now, donations were starting to trickle in through our website. During other disasters we typically opened a charitable fund for a week or two and raised somewhere between $1,000 and $25,000. We knew things were different this time. At one point we were receiving $1,000 a minute through our website.

When the disaster is at home you can’t just work. I left the office again, this time to get my mother, stepfather and grandmother situated at my in-laws’ home in Chico near Bidwell Park. The fire was moving the length of a football field every second. It was getting closer. They would be forced to evacuate again within a few hours.

My wife, son and I got home, made dinner and at 7:30 p.m., we heard sirens. This time they were outside our home. Police were speeding up and down the backroads in our tiny neighborhood telling everyone to get out. We opened the door to a first responder saying, “You need to leave — the fire jumped the freeway. Five minutes max.”

The fire was never supposed to come anywhere near us. We were surrounded by green farmland. We grabbed water, identification and the family dog. That’s what we had time for. The goats and chickens would have to fend for themselves. The sky was raining ash now. We drove south with hundreds of our neighbors. Nowhere felt safe from the fire’s wrath. I checked in with the NVCF team.

Everyone was doing something to help family, friends or complete strangers. We had 52,000 people just outrun a firestorm, and thousands more were evacuating from the valley floor.

By the time we found an open hotel room off Interstate 99, we were in the middle of California. When I crawled in bed at midnight, I knew what NVCF had to do.

NVCF would need to transform into a disaster relief and recovery organization. We’d spent 13 years building relationships, credibility and products that could mobilize masses of people, dollars and ideas to solve problems. We could do this. We just had to.
By Nov. 9, we were all hands on deck. We ordered the necessary N95 masks and air purifiers. The work we needed to do would be done within the ash and smoke. We didn’t know then how toxic the air was.

We activated the NVCF Board of Directors Disaster Grantmaking Committee. Every member of our mighty board stepped up: Debbie Rossi, Diane Ruby (rest in peace), Janet Wietbrock, Sherry Holbrook, Farshad Azad and Earl Jessee.

The first 10 grants were issued Nov. 11, 72 hours after the fire started, to all the shelters caring for evacuees. These were the first of hundreds of grants we would make to help keep shelter doors open, water and food stocked, and provide gas and gift cards for daily necessities.

We knew the only way to help the tens of thousands in need was to help the helpers. We could never become the service providers directly. We couldn’t possibly provide medical services, senior services, youth services and animal services. We couldn’t be emergency responders. We had 52,000 evacuees who wouldn’t return home for years, if ever. We would have to find the army of helpers and support them. That was the only path forward.

We decided that same day to post in real time on our website and social media every grant we made so the world could see everything we were doing. This was not an industry norm, not a federal mandate. This was a gut reaction and an act of radical transparency. We knew trust would be the most important currency now. Even now, with more than $51 million deployed, we still post every grant we make with Camp Fire donations.

As the team handled new operational needs, I talked to leaders in our communities and region trying to map out the most effective role for NVCF for the days ahead. I wanted them to hear from me directly that NVCF was going to help.

At some point during those first 48 hours, I called the mayor of Chico, Sean Morgan. I knew he would be the voice of our community now and I wanted the world to know NVCF stood ready. Later that afternoon, Sean would mention NVCF in an interview on MSNBC. The donations we were receiving from locals based on our own credibility and track record turned into donations pouring in from all over the globe.
Ron Howard, Cyndi Lauper and ESPN’s Adam Schefter were among the many well-known people with millions of followers who mentioned us on social media as the place to send help. Marc Benioff of SalesForce told Jim Cramer on CNBC’s “Mad Money” that he was donating $1 million to NVCF. Companies with huge name recognition like Wells Fargo, United Airlines, Verizon, JP Morgan Chase, Apple, PayPal, Raley’s and Comcast made significant donations to NVCF, which encouraged customers, employees and other businesses to do the same.

Sports franchises started donating and asked their fans to do the same. The Oakland Raiders were one of the first to call. Owner Mark Davis had attended Chico State and made a large donation. The San Francisco 49ers hosted the Paradise High School football team for a nationally televised game and encouraged fans and ESPN viewers to donate to the NVCF fund. The San Jose Earthquakes, whose star player Chris Wondolowski played at Chico State, made a substantial donation. The Golden State Warriors produced videos with their players encouraging donations to us.

We had the nation’s attention and tried to keep it. We knew that once the fire was under control, the world would move on. The government was projecting a $15 billion disaster. Philanthropy would have to be involved.

The culture at NVCF had been handcrafted with a high risk tolerance, extreme creativity and focus on speed. These became critical factors in allowing our organization to survive scaling at an unprecedented rate to handle unprecedented challenges — with no blueprint in sight.

Even with our relentless determination, the seven of us had a hard time keeping up. A missed call was potential help from United Airlines. Or AARP. Or Delta Dental. We all had the experience of answering questions from an unidentified caller who would ask about our organization, our service fee and where the donations would be deployed. Often the conversation would end with: “Thank you. We’ll be sending you a check for $100,000.”

Like so many others, my identical twin sister called multiple times a day to see if there was anything she could do to help. Everyone wanted to do something and in most cases “send money” was the only answer we had. But as the president and CEO of the Seattle Storm, a professional sports franchise, I had a specific favor to ask. NVCF was getting donations from companies all around the nation and we had no time to thank them publicly. I asked if her team could make our “thank you” images for social media. The world was showing up when we needed them most. We had to offer our love and gratitude, somehow. The Seattle Storm made that possible.

One morning I noticed a Facebook post from Priscilla Chan of the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative. They were committing up to $1 million in a dollar-for-dollar match through Facebook to help with the Camp Fire, and NVCF was their beneficiary. When it was all said and done, they would send us $750,000 but their Facebook campaign would push our name around the globe.
We would get crates of mail every day. The envelopes would be full of checks, or sometimes we’d get packages full of gift cards.

Our lobby was always full of people who had checks to present to us. Buddhist Monks who traveled from Sacramento. Local restaurants, bands, people who made shirts they sold and the underage kid who brewed beer to give all the money to help.

As the only one tending to social media, I would stay up till 3 a.m. responding to every message, good, bad or ugly. All my social media behavior was grounded in engagement. But all the sudden there were thousands of people to connect to and many of them were in the darkest moments of their lives, confused and certain NVCF was there to make a buck.

I was heartbroken to see the integrity of our little foundation being questioned. In this low-trust, highly traumatic environment, I would learn that everyone, I mean everyone, who runs into a fire feels the heat. It’s what makes organizations like American Red Cross, and United Way, and Samaritan’s Purse such heroes, not to mention our city, county and federal government employees who sign up to do this repeatedly. Heroes.

I called a meeting at some point during the blur of those early days. All I said was: “Our job is to do the next thing that we can with the information we have. We’re not going to control the narrative right now. There is too much suffering here. We will let the history books decide how we did.” I told myself that every time I saw an accusation hit Facebook.

Gifts continued pouring in from throughout the United States, no place sending more love than San Francisco and Los Angeles.

This was all unsolicited. We didn’t have to make a single phone call asking for donations. The only solicitation came about a week after the fire when I sent an email to the CEOs of all community foundations in California. The gist of the letter: “Something terrible has happened here and I’m going to need your help.”
It wasn’t money I was seeking. We needed their wisdom and guidance. Nearly all the community foundations responded. A man by the name of John Kobara, chief operating officer from the California Community Foundation in Los Angeles, quickly became one of my most trusted advisors. CCF would ultimately be the financial reason NVCF was able to transform to help the way we did. They would invest in our infrastructure so that we never had to charge a service fee of more than one penny on the dollar (1%) to donors.

CCF will always be an unsung hero of the Camp Fire recovery. A few days after the fire, I got a phone call from Aaron Rodgers, the Chico native and Green Bay Packers quarterback, asking “How can I help?” He would end up donating $1 million and his partner State Farm would match it. Ultimately, the Aaron Rodgers NorCal Fire Recovery Fund at NVCF raised more than $8 million. His trust and national influence made a huge impact on our little operation.

Sierra Nevada’s owners, Ken Grossman and Katie Gonser, have long held a family foundation fund at NVCF. They have always taken care of the community with little fanfare. They did so again after the Camp Fire, both privately and through one very public campaign — they provided the recipe and the ingredients for more than 1,400 breweries nationwide to make Resilience IPA. The proceeds from each pint sold would come back to the community for Camp Fire recovery.

One reason for our fundraising success was our 1% administrative fee. Companies and foundations know this is extremely low. But the low fee meant we would need to quickly find other ways to build out our operations to sustain this transformation.

On the ground, things were bad and worsening. The towns, cities and nonprofits were completely overwhelmed. Even FEMA seemed overmatched. We would need to help lead.
Exactly 10 days after the fire, I was on a call with Chris Hayashida-Knight about the next steps for our transformation. When we discussed some of the challenges on the ground, we agreed we needed one person solely dedicated to disaster relief. Above all else, I needed someone I could trust with the most important work NVCF would do to address suffering in the world. There was only one person to call, Jovanni Tricerri.

Jovanni hit the ground and started visiting shelters and attending every imaginable meeting with responders. Our little team continued to adapt to the needs we were hearing. Far beyond grantmaking, NVCF had to design collaborations and partnerships to do everything from building out and funding the life-saving case management system to building homes to funding mosquito abatement with thousands of pools and septic tanks exposed.

In early January, NVCF created the Butte Strong Fund out of the Sierra Nevada, Aaron Rodgers and NVCF partnership. This fund and its grant-making committee, made up primarily of highly engaged fire survivors, would ultimately drive the priorities and grant-making decisions for the deployment of the short- and long-term recovery dollars at NVCF.

As the weeks passed, the ongoing suffering took hold. No one could go back up the ridge. All the emergency plans the feds had devised didn’t seem to apply to a firestorm. We needed new solutions. Everyone was working hard to help but nothing came easy. And the longer it took for people to get help the more doubt, confusion and pain settled in. We had to expand our team to help manage so many different fronts.

We started incubating new nonprofits popping up in response to vast unmet needs being revealed. The first nonprofit we started incubating and physically holding in our space was the Camp Fire Long-Term Recovery Group, which became the Camp Fire Collaborative. They would be the first of many we would incubate to address this nightmare.

We opened dozens of designated fire funds as well. This was a massive undertaking because each new fund required a contract, an individualized webpage, a charitable fund and all the accounting services, including tax receipts and collection of donations. But we had to do it. No one else could.
We realized early on if everyone, every business, agency and organization offered what they do best to address this disaster we might actually get through this. And, we stayed that course even when the challenges continued to mount. Even when the trauma from the fire started to settle in and new waves of needs began to emerge.

Three years later, we are still grantng hundreds of thousands of dollars every month to address the enormity of needs the Camp Fire made or exposed. We have expanded our team to sustain the demand for our services. We continue to use the heartache, hope and experience to address the fires that explode each year and displace our communities. We also are using everything we learned in this nightmare to respond to the deadly COVID-19 virus and the ongoing drought crisis.

It’s why we’re here.

We created NVCF to help reduce suffering in this world. Without knowing it, we created NVCF for this moment. When I think about what allowed us to transform overnight it wasn’t the tactics and strategies in this document, although they proved to be critical. It was the years of trust we’d built within our communities, in concert with the sheer magnitude of love we operate with, internally and externally, that sustained us when the firestorm came.
The impacts of Camp Fire disaster on housing market conditions and housing opportunities in the tri-county region.

Release Date: September 1, 2020
Consultant: Richard Hunt, Peloton Research + Economics
Lead Agency: Camp Fire Collaborative

The study outlined the challenges and opportunities of affordable housing in Butte, Glenn and Tehama counties. The issue became especially important following the elimination of so much affordable housing stock in Paradise and surrounding communities. In most cases these homes were not only affordable, but they were unsubsidized. The study offered alternative approaches that work to deliver workforce housing options within reach of more moderate-income households for ownership and potentially lower-income households for rent or purchase. Read the full 283-page report here: nvcf.org/the-impacts-of-camp-fire-on-housing-market-conditions.

Collaborators: Fannie Mae, Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., North Valley Community Foundation

Camp Fire: Regional Economic Impact Analysis

Release Date: January 2021
Consultant: Economic & Planning Systems, Inc
Lead Agency: 3 CORE

This study provided the region’s business community with pertinent information needed to make short-term decisions regarding business operations. The following technical components were included: 1) regional demographic and socioeconomic profiles that capture conditions both before and after the Camp Fire event; 2) direct, indirect and induced economic impacts of the Camp Fire in the Paradise Ridge, Chico and broader region; and 3) short-term potential residential and employment growth scenarios. Read the full 261-page report here: nvcf.org/camp-fire-regional-eco-impact-analysis.

Collaborators: United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., North Valley Community Foundation
Town of Paradise Long-Term Community Recovery Plan

Consultant: Barry Long, Urban Design Associates
Lead Agency: Town of Paradise
Release Date: June 25, 2019

The study outlined the challenges and opportunities of affordable housing in Butte, Glenn and Tehama counties. The issue became especially important following the elimination of so much affordable housing stock in Paradise and surrounding communities. In most cases these homes were not only affordable, but they were unsubsidized. The study offered alternative approaches that work to deliver workforce housing options within reach of more moderate-income households for ownership and potentially lower-income households for rent or purchase. Read the full 145-page report here: nvcf.org/long-term-community-recovery-plan-paradise-ca.

Collaborators: United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., North Valley Community Foundation
CONCLUSION

The Camp Fire disaster was unprecedented in its size and scope. And while the devastation happened extremely fast, recovery has not been as quick as we’d like. In order to meet the challenges we faced, our community needed to work together on a scale equally unprecedented. Our community leaders needed to show up in different ways with different skills.

With a long history of community leadership in our region, NVCF engaged with every nonprofit and agency on the ground providing support to survivors, addressing the areas of greatest need.

We know that disasters like this do not discriminate, but recovery processes often do. The priority of philanthropic organizations working through a disaster is to ensure that the most vulnerable populations impacted by this disaster will not be left behind. The shared outcome is a more resilient community that engages everyone in its success.

Our hope with this playbook is to share the lessons learned so that other communities and the philanthropic organizations that respond to them would not have to start at square one. Unfortunately, these types of disasters are becoming more common and severe. The more we can share our experiences and grow from them, the more effective we can be in addressing the needs our communities will face.

If there is any way that the NVCF can support others in their recovery journey following a disaster (or preparing for one), we are eager and happy to provide any assistance we can. Please email Jovanni Tricerri, our vice president of programs, at jtricerri@nvcf.org.