

Valley Fire evacuees seek shelter in Mendocino County



Campground volunteer Jocelyn Schmith takes inventory and maintains the kitchen supplies for evacuees of the Valley Fire. Chris Pugh-Ukiah Daily Journal

By Adam Randall, udjar@ukiahdj.com, [@theadamrandall](https://twitter.com/theadamrandall) on Twitter

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At least 12 families had flocked to the Bu-Shay Campground near Lake Mendocino Tuesday afternoon, seeking refuge from the massive Valley Fire that struck Lake County over the weekend and continues to burn thousands of acres.

Unfortunately, more displaced residents were expected by volunteers at the campground as Lake County shelters continue to fill up, and evacuation orders remain in effect.

As of Cal Fire's morning update Tuesday, the fire had spread over 67,200 acres toward Sonoma and Napa counties.


It started Saturday afternoon for unknown reasons near the small town of Cobb in Lake County, and has left four firefighters injured and one resident dead. Cal Fire said containment has reached 30 percent, but close to 600 homes are known to be destroyed, and another 9,000 structures are estimated to be threatened.

The Lake Mendocino campground, which is only open to evacuees at this time, is littered with tents filled with supplies ranging from toys, shoes and kitchen goods, with more coming in every minute.

Chris Schooley, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers park ranger for Lake Mendocino, said the extent of the Corp's involvement is to really just "open the doors" to evacuees and volunteers.

Schooley said the Corps, which operates all campgrounds around the Lake Mendocino area, reopened the Bu-Shay Campground which was closed after Labor Day, and are paying for extended shower cleaning and providing water.

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Local Mendocino County residents Pam Dorsey, Sarah Stockley and Sarah Ranney, are behind the effort of making the campground a second home for evacuees, and are rotating shifts so there's a volunteer on site at all hours.

"We knew they were still evacuating in Lake County and knew they were running out of room there," Dorsey said about the volunteer's efforts. "They're our sister county, and it could happen to us."

A lot of unknowns remained for the evacuees using the campground as a residence, as many said they were unsure if they still had a home left as the charred Lake County area remains locked down by law enforcement and fire personnel. (Law enforcement sources said Tuesday there had been some looting going on of unburned but evacuated homes and some arrests were made. No official information was available at press time.)

Melissa Blackwell arrived at Bu-Shay Tuesday morning with her mother Debbie Framke, five dogs, a cat and an Albino Pacman Frog after a short-lived stay at a local hotel.

"This is the worst thing I've ever experienced in my life," Blackwell said. "We don't know when we are going home."

Blackwell said she doesn't even know if she lost her home yet near the Clearlake Riviera, and hasn't been back since she was evacuated.

Susan Aiken, a resident of nearby Cobb Mountain, said she saw the flames growing closer to her home Saturday night, and after evacuating, had to sleep in the back of her car. Like Blackwell, Aiken said she didn't what the condition of her home was as of Tuesday afternoon.

Upon her arrival at the campground, which she found out about on Facebook, she was given a tent to stay in, along with food and clothes.

Aiken said she has lived in Lake County since 1981, and this busy fire season hasn't come as a surprise to her.

"We always know there's going to be fires," she said.

Volunteers at the Bu-Shay Campground say they are still in need of food, gas and lighting equipment for the evacuees.

The campground is located off Highway 20 between Lake Mendocino and Potter Valley Road.

Dorsey said all animals are welcome and will be accommodated accordingly. The campground also provides running water, showers and bathrooms free of charge.

Fire relief donations are now being accepted at Savings Bank of Mendocino County

To support the fire recovery efforts, Savings Bank of Mendocino County is accepting financial donations on behalf of North Coast Opportunities.

Tax deductible donations and checks can be addressed to North Coast Opportunities with "Valley Fire" written on the memo line and can be dropped off at any Savings Bank location in Lake or Mendocino counties, or mailed to P.O. Box 3600 Ukiah, CA. 95482.

Redwood Credit Union and Mendo-Lake Credit Union also have funds set up for donations.

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