

Nancy Baglietto: Fear, fire and homelessness

Lifestyles | October 2, 2019

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I am your neighbor and I worry about fire, just like you do. Our homeless neighbors are concerned about fire as well. Just about everywhere I go, when people learn what I do, they ask me about homeless camps in the forest and the prospect of fire in our foothill communities – what scientists call the “wildland-urban interface.”

While I am not an expert on fire, our Outreach Team ends up in the “fire prevention” business by default as they offer homeless campers safer housing options. But before we make too many assumptions, I’d like to share this fact from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection: Only 3.8% of wildfires are caused by

campfires. The known causes of wildfires in California vary, but predominant ignition sources between 2013 – 2017 were debris burning (13.8%); electrical power and lines (9.4%); vehicles (8.8%); and equipment use such as mowers, weed whackers, etc. (8.2%). Arson causes 7% of our wildfires; lightning 6.4% and campfires 3.8%.

However, homeless encampments in the forest have on occasion provided the source of ignition for wildfires. We had a small fire in Grass Valley last year that was thankfully extinguished quickly by our first responders. The 49er Fire, which occurred three decades ago in 1988, was reportedly started by a mentally ill homeless man.

So the next question obviously becomes: What can we practically do about homeless encampments to minimize the potential for wildfire?

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Some people propose making camping in the forest illegal, and strictly enforcing that law. But it's just not practical for small police forces to patrol hundreds of square miles of wildlands. And under federal law, forest camping is legal in National Forests, on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land, and in wilderness areas. Also, a recent federal court decision (*Martin vs. The City of Boise*) ruled that punishing homeless people who have nowhere else to sleep is a violation of the Eighth Amendment, which bans cruel and unusual punishment.

Our solution? Get people out of the forest by offering them a better alternative. At Hospitality House, our Homeless Outreach Team proactively goes into forest encampments, gets to know the people in them, and offers them a better option. Right now, that option is our Hospitality House emergency shelter, in the future it could be the Brunswick Commons permanent supportive housing complex or Nevada County Grand Jury's recommendation: a legal, supervised campground.

How do we equip professionals, both police and county officials to go into camps for those discussions? Through training. We recently partnered with the County and local law enforcement to introduce California State Peace Officers Standards and Training (<https://www.theunion.com/news/application-granted-county-receives-state-grant-to-ameliorate-homelessness/>) for working with homeless individuals, including those in camps. The curriculum will advance more productive solutions rather than incarceration for minor, non-violent offenders, and is expected to be released in spring 2020.

We also conduct major homeless encampment cleanups each year, partnering with agencies like the Nevada County Probation Department, local law enforcement, SYRCL and the City of Grass Valley, with our next cleanup scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 12. Hospitality House also has an agreement with Nevada County Code Enforcement to immediately confiscate and dispose of any items discovered on county land that pose an immediate threat to community safety, including sources of ignition.

Even though campfires cause less than 3% of wildfires*, providing permanent housing and safe places for people to stay is essential for many reasons. To this end, the County and Regional Housing Authority are working diligently to launch the Brunswick Commons project that could house 40-70 homeless people permanently. Additionally, the Nevada County Continuum of Care is investigating ways to legally open a supervised campground that could invite folks living in the brush into a designated area with supervision.

As we all look at our properties with a new eye for fire hazards, let's remember those who do not have a "home" to protect and would be incredibly vulnerable in case of fire. Hospitality House will continue to reach out in compassion and educate our homeless neighbors on behalf of all of us that have a home.

* California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, 2013 - 2017 sources

Nancy Baglietto is the executive director of Hospitality House, Nevada County's only emergency homeless shelter.