

# The Real State of The Response

A Brief on Disaster Response in Sonoma County



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**NORTH BAY**  
**ORGANIZING PROJECT**

PROYECTO ORGANIZATIVO DEL NORTE DE LA BAHIA

# Abstract

***“Any policy is racist if it increases inequality.”***  
***- Ibram X Kendi***

The disasters that struck Sonoma County in the last 2.5 years, and corresponding responses by government and civil society, continue to shed light on deep inequalities in our community. Environmental events are not inherently unjust. Rather, vulnerability to the effects of disaster are informed by gender, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, special needs, age, housing tenure, and (most importantly) the ways in which government, philanthropy, and civil society respond to these vulnerabilities. To date, disaster response and recovery efforts in our community have systematically excluded the most vulnerable among us. In past events, non-English speakers, renters, and undocumented individuals have all reported significant gaps in disaster resources. Moving forward, Sonoma County must center vulnerable communities in recovery frameworks in order to avoid perpetuating institutional racism in disaster response and recovery. We must work together to enact just responses by lifting up the narratives of the most affected and by reinforcing the work of mutual aid partnerships.

## Recommendation Summary

1. Empower, sustain, and finance **culturally competent** community leaders for mutual aid disaster response and policy development.
2. Institute strict ordinances that **protect tenants** from discrimination and displacement as a result of lost wages, market speculation, underlying racism, and classism.
3. Invest and organize around those economic and social housing structures that **affirm self-governance** and build equity without building wealth on the backs of our community.
4. Create clear and accountable communication policy, enabling every person in Sonoma County to receive information in their **functional language** before, during, and after a disaster.
5. Effectively respond by **providing public funding without debt** directly to residents bearing the brunt of economic impacts as a result of disasters.
6. Fund **community-driven navigation, preparedness, response, and recovery**. Trust in community organizing invests in agency where it is most needed.

# Introduction

The increasing frequency and severity of unprecedented disasters continues to activate mutual aid systems that developed out of necessity during the 2017 Tubbs Fire. Since 2017, our community has quickly moved from a static cycle of preparedness, response and recovery to an ongoing and evolving response.

As a small part of that evolution, the North Bay Organizing Project concentrates on centering those closest to injustice to build power and identify solutions. We believe this goal has never been more critical than it is now.

We began this document in the summer of 2019 to bring clarity to the injustices of the Tubbs Fire recovery process. Since then, our community has been affected by multiple cascading events including the Kincadee Fire, PG&E power shut-offs, a global pandemic and now an economic fallout resulting from a Shelter In Place ordinance. These



disruptions to our lives and livelihoods are ongoing and are reshaping our community in profound ways. This is the first part in a developing series of community-informed written reports meant to amplify the lives and experiences of our communities that are systematically excluded and isolated in disasters. This is a call to action for government and philanthropy here in Sonoma County but also in all counties and regions facing disasters.

**What happens moving forward is our choice. Government and philanthropy have the opportunity to affirmatively**

**invest in working class and marginalized peoples by breaking cycles of disaster capitalism<sup>1</sup>, racism and classism. If traditional frameworks of disaster response are ineffective in addressing the needs of the most vulnerable, those frameworks must be dismantled. Our community will not wait for an incremental transition. We must have a just response<sup>2</sup>. In Sonoma County, as a direct result of institutional racism, local Latinx-led organizations have leveraged their own resources to provide mutual aid during disasters.**

# UndocuFund as Mutual Aid

***Mutual aid is a community's response to members in need. It starts with identifying needs, involves sourcing resources from within the very community it's operating in, and results in the distribution of those resources directly to those who need it most, no matter what. Mutual aid is a political act.***

In the hours, days and weeks following the 2017 Tubbs, Nuns, and Pocket Fires (Sonoma Complex Fire) neighbors, families, friends and strangers came together to support one another in extraordinary acts and in extraordinary ways. Individuals rose above their circumstances, and above invisible and literal walls to take care of one another. At the time, the 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires created unprecedented community trauma. Those impacts continue to create hardships that have, in turn, engendered a collective sense of community responsibility and empathy. The astonishing stories of survival and the development of mutual aid models such as UndocuFund stand as ongoing testaments to our community's resilience.

In the aftermath of the 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires, we created UndocuFund as a joint effort<sup>3</sup> to raise and distribute funding for Sonoma County's

undocumented residents. While undocumented individuals represent a significant percentage of the county's population as our friends, neighbors, coworkers, and service providers, there are very few formal resources available to them in the aftermath of disasters. Because of legal status, they cannot benefit from FEMA cash-assistance



**UndocuFund**  
for Fire Relief in Sonoma County

programs and face barriers to accessing local-level funding and support. Starting in 2017, UndocuFund raised specific funding to aid the undocumented community in disaster recovery. The fund continues to be successful and this aid is invested directly back into our community.

**As of March, 2020, UndocuFund has raised and disseminated \$7,892,000 to 4,400 families.** To distribute funding, UndocuFund engaged in an intake process with each applicant. We collected information on the applicant's household make-up, employment, need, and disaster impact. While perfunctory, this intake data was also revelatory.

Historically, disaster preparedness, response, and recovery processes have been built to serve community members that are easily quantifiable. In planning for disasters, surveys, interviews, and observation statistics are used to "understand impact" and "identify need".

# UndocuFund as Mutual Aid - cont'd

Undocumented community members are often excluded from these needs assessments as they cannot be as readily distilled into datasets for analysis. As a result, they are not typically represented in reporting, economic analysis, or disaster planning<sup>4</sup>. Many of these community members are renters, non-English speakers, and low-wage earners. As such, their experiences in the aftermath of disasters tend to be quite different from individuals who have access to institutional aid and investment. The data collected during UndocuFund's intake process serves as a representation of these marginalized perspectives and experiences. Analysis of the first 375 applications in this dataset below (only a small fraction of the 2,500+ applications collected in 2018) yields a story that, in many ways, varies greatly and vitally from other narratives told about the Tubbs Fire.

The absence of narratives representing undocumented experiences is critical and has a large impact on how this community is accounted for in planning and recovery. To ground this disparity, we can examine the intake data in conversation with news journalism: In 2018, a

## UndocuFund Intake Form Statistics<sup>5</sup>

- 50% single-income households
- 90% of households were renters
- 27% of households reported being behind on rent
- \$14.81 average hourly wage (\$11.00 less than Sonoma County Average)
- 30% of individuals reported seasonal or temporary employment
- 75% of households reported lost wages or unemployment as a result of the fire
- 31% of households incurred debt as a result of the fire
- 21% of households reported food loss as a result of PG&E shutoffs

Press Democrat article was published stating that "...overall, the unemployment rate is virtually unchanged, inching up from 2.9 percent before the fire to 3 percent now... While thousands of people lost their homes, a smaller number lost their jobs."<sup>6</sup> This sweeping economic claim was made using data representing only a portion of our community – the disparity between this statement and the argument made by the data described above is stark. UndocuFund's Sonoma Complex Fires dataset, when compared to the data used in local reporting raises an important point: **the data that we use to take action around resilience is often exclusionary based on immigration status and therefore race.** It privileges

the voices and perspectives of individuals who are easiest to collect information from: citizens, English-speakers, and those who are amenable to contact with state/local government. This raises a question: **When we invest in resilience, who are we investing in?** Examining these narratives, and this juxtaposition, allows us to reflect on how we can do, and be, better. Disasters continue to mount and UndocuFund continues to fill a crucial gap in community care and resource distribution. **In the absence of adequate government and philanthropic response, our community members and local organizations are left with the heavy burden of picking up this slack to care for one another in mutual aid.**<sup>7</sup>

# Mutual Aid Update: Kincade Fire

***“Disaster collectivism describes the way communities radically come together, both forming new and building on existing networks of mutual aid, to take care of each other in the immediate aftermath of disaster.”***

***- Movement Generation***

The 2017 Sonoma Complex Fire exposed multiple inadequacies in disaster response by the County of Sonoma. Community members reported experiencing racism in shelters and a dangerous exclusion of Spanish-speaking people from fire alerts, services, protections and other fire relief. These experiences led to a set of policy recommendations informed by community discussions and listening circles then compiled by the Immigrant Defense Task Force of the North Bay Organizing Project.<sup>8</sup> The goal was to center the experiences of the Latinx and immigrant community to inform policy that would address community needs for safety and vital information, specifically around the County’s Resiliency Framework. Simultaneously, organizations and leaders from the Latinx community learned from the inequitable dominant disaster response model and began contributing to new mutual aid efforts that grew during the Kincade Fire and power shut off disasters of

October 2019.

When PG&E instituted a mandatory public safety power shutoff (PSPS) and a line on their high voltage tower broke, causing the Kincade Fire, community leaders and community-serving organizations responded immediately without waiting for government response. These organizations and leaders knew that they would need a collective response to ensure that everyone, especially the undocumented and limited English speakers could access resources and find safe shelters.

What resulted was an incredible display of disaster collectivism in a context where formal structures of response were too slow to adapt to community needs. Staff and individuals from multiple organizations mobilized as bilingual support partners in shelters, starting at the Healdsburg Evacuation Center where Corazon Healdsburg immediately integrated itself.

When the town of Healdsburg was evacuated due to the approaching Kincade Fire, Corazon Healdsburg’s bilingual staff, who were effectively integrated into the County and Red Cross operations, tapped on staff and volunteers from other organizations that they had been in partnership with already. These relationships directed how this newly established and evolving protocol for community care was to be implemented at shelters throughout Sonoma County, and into neighboring county shelters in Marin and San Francisco. Once in place, this community brigade of bilingual shelter support developed a process for intake and distribution of direct aid to families and individuals. Community leaders adopted Undocufund’s mutual aid model with Corazon Healdsburg’s funds and successfully distributed through staff and volunteers of multiple Latinx-serving agencies from Sonoma County. It was disaster collectivism in its truest form.

# Our Path Forward



Disasters are not inevitable, nor are natural disasters “natural”.<sup>9</sup> Vulnerability to disasters is informed by gender, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, special needs, age, housing tenure and more. These pre-existing social factors become inequalities reinforced during disasters. **Disaster response and recovery programs must be developed through the lens of mitigating structural inequality not just to avoid harm, but to affirmatively deconstruct the historic**

**racism and classism that continues to exist in Sonoma County. This is our responsibility.**

## Housing

One pertinent example of structural inequality is access to affordable housing. Homes are the backbone of community health, economic stability and resilience. Access to affordable housing impacts us all, but it affects renters and low wage earners more than others. In 2019,

half of all renters in Sonoma County were considered low-income or low wage earners.<sup>10</sup> Communities of color disproportionately represent low wage earners in Sonoma County at over 50% even though they represent only roughly 30% of the county.<sup>11</sup> Understanding structural inequality in the housing market is key to forecasting and mitigating vulnerability to every type of disaster.

Before the 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires, Sonoma

# Our Path Forward – cont'd

County had a 1% housing vacancy rate. The firestorm incinerated 5,200 homes. In Coffey Park, 40% of residents were renters prior to the fires, but estimates from Permit Sonoma suggest only 20% of residents will be renters after rebuilding. Our analysis of land transfers from 2017 to 2020 indicate that recent housing speculation since the Sonoma Complex Fires could be one of the strongest trends fueling displacement in the history of Sonoma County. This displacement is likely to be exacerbated in the coming months and years if government continues incentivizing a historically racist and exclusive speculative housing market. This tired model simply does not work. Real estate speculation reinforces the precariousness of working-class and marginalized peoples.

**Centering equity in disaster response and recovery means prioritizing those most impacted by housing insecurity.**

## Leaders

In the wake of any disaster, those most impacted have valuable narratives to inform a community's first response. Government must recognize, value, and learn from community-driven responses by listening to the voices of historically undervalued community leaders. Leaders carry out informal resource mapping for those impacted and identify "who holds the keys" to staging and response areas, evacuation plans, resources such as clean water, food, and sanitation supplies. If we recognize community capacity, leaders can act as neighborhood-level organizers whose focus is to deploy alongside government in the event of a disaster for mutual aid, self-reliance, and a culturally-competent response.

**These same leaders can facilitate the incorporation of historic community knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge in communication with policy makers. These individuals**

**are most often low wage earners in marginalized communities and first responders in a disaster. As such, if we expect and value their participation, leaders must be compensated appropriately for their time and training.**

## Language Justice

Beyond functional community knowledge, **government and philanthropic leaders must prioritize effective and accessible communication by utilizing the principles of language justice.** All of our residents deserve access to critical and potentially life-saving disaster response and recovery information. Over 30% of Sonoma County residents are people of color and many are most functional in languages other than English. Agencies and organizations must fund competent translators to reduce vulnerability and stop relegating non-English speakers to the shadows of emergency response.



# Direct Aid: Government and Philanthropy

## **Government and Philanthropy:**

*Whether government institutions and philanthropic organizations choose to assist or inhibit community-driven mutual aid projects, determines in part the well-being of working class and marginalized communities.*

Disaster recovery in Sonoma County is funded through a combination of government financing and philanthropy. The scope and variability of recent disasters in Sonoma County provides valuable insight into the capacity of local government and philanthropy in response and recovery. It is clear that government, whether it be local city and county level, or regional and state, is the only institution with the capacity to deploy public funding at the scale now necessary to avert economic catastrophe for vulnerable residents during the COVID-19 pandemic and in anticipation of the climate change-induced disasters

that are sure to come. Direct aid must be informed by the needs of vulnerable residents, respecting the contribution of frontline communities providing essential services as the same residents who are the backbone of our economy during recovery.

**Whether government institutions and philanthropy organizations choose to assist or inhibit community-driven mutual aid partnerships will determine the wellbeing of working class and marginalized communities.** Currently, government resources and response structures do not meet the needs of these

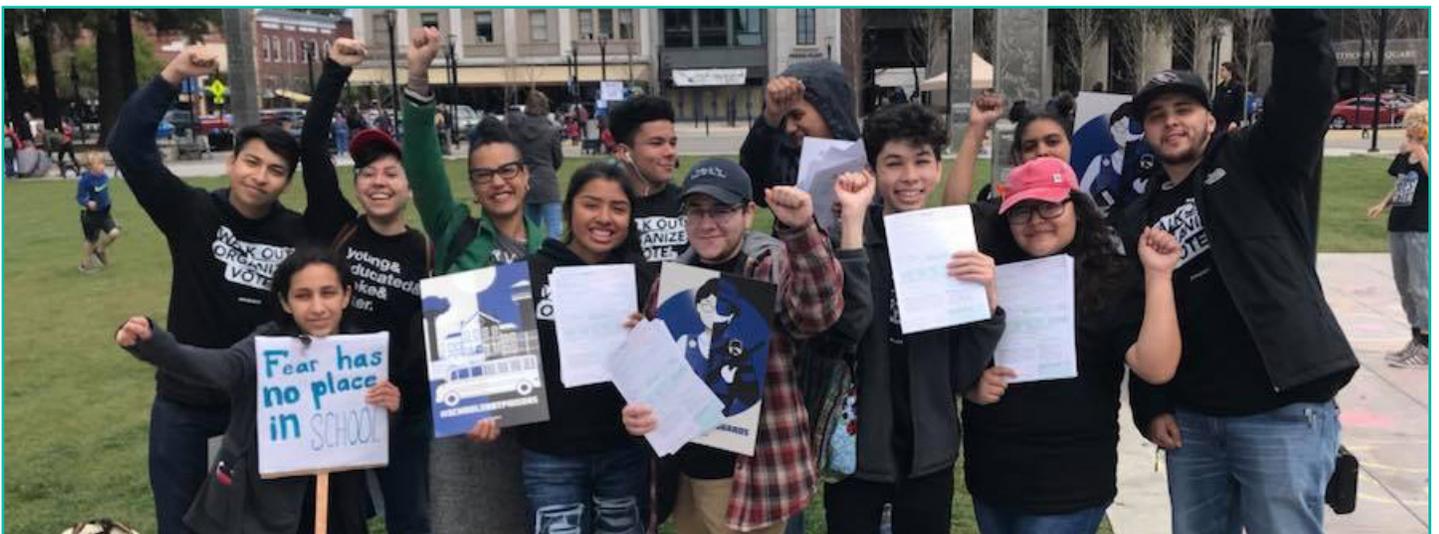
communities. Since 2017 however, philanthropy has responded and funded mutual aid projects. Foundations have created opportunities for participatory philanthropy, allocated resources to reinforce community trust, and enabled community organizations to respond to the experiences of residents typically unaccounted for. More work needs to be done to reinforce this new operational pattern. We need institutions and organizations that are robust enough to pivot resources in response to community needs and nimble enough to navigate the nuances of those impacts.



# Recommendations

The following priority recommendations are set forth to address institutional, social, and market conditions that persistently undercut vulnerable residents striving for safety, stability, and resilience in our county. They are proactive opportunities to build community power and capacity for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery within the context of underlying social inequities and on-going disruptions:

- The Board of Supervisors and city councils must institute strict ordinances that protect tenants from discrimination and displacement as a result of market speculation, underlying racism, and classism. This includes a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures, including just cause eviction; rent freeze; vacation rental moratorium; rental inspection program and rental assistance.
- Invest, organize and support policy to advance economic and social housing structures that affirm self-governance and build equity without building wealth on the backs of our community.
- Empower, sustain, and finance culturally competent community leaders to activate as disaster preparedness and response resources.
- Create clear, and accountable, communication policy enabling every person in Sonoma County to receive information in their functional language before, during, and after a disaster.
- Government must effectively respond in its capacity to provide public funding without debt directly to residents bearing the brunt of economic impacts as a result of disasters.
- Philanthropy must fund community-driven navigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Trust in community organizing invests in agency where it is most needed.



# Conclusion

Our experience over the last two and a half years shows that disasters both compound and expose structural inequality in our community. Since we know the determinants of structural inequality in our community are rooted in racism and classism, it is our hope that these recommendations act as a call to action to challenge outdated and discriminatory practices and structures. It is imperative that public institutions prioritize community-driven transformation in addition to providing direct aid to those most vulnerable during disasters. We must rise together, through justice.

Today, as always, our mutual aid initiatives will bring light to the shadows. We imagine a community without shadows, where people are valued over profit and disasters illuminate best practices of community care.

North Bay Organizing Project would like to acknowledge and thank our partners:

- Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees
- The Graton Day Labor Center
- North Bay Jobs with Justice
- Latino Community Foundation
- Community Foundation of Sonoma County

This report was written by: Belén Lopez-Grady • Gabriela Orantes • Susan Shaw • Susanna Pho with contributions from Diego Fernández Pagés and Omar Medina

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2. A just response means government policies and philanthropic responses center community members most vulnerable and most impacted; we reshape public community care and; examine and shift how resources are allocated so extractive economies are not privileged over people.
3. UndocuFund was formed on the third day of the Tubbs fire by Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, The Graton Day Labor Center, North Bay Jobs with Justice and the North Bay Organizing Project. These four organizations came together to address the situation their constituencies were facing and responded with love and care.
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# NORTH BAY ORGANIZING PROJECT

PROYECTO ORGANIZATIVO DEL NORTE DE LA BAHIA



The North Bay Organizing Project (NBOP) is a grassroots, multi-racial, and multi-issue organization comprised of over 20 faith, labor, environmental, student and community-based organizations based in Sonoma County. NBOP is affiliated with the Gamaliel Foundation, a nationwide network of more than 50 community and faith-based organizing projects. NBOP seeks to build a regional power organization rooted in working class and minority communities in the North Bay and to implement public policy reforms that promote economic, social, racial and environmental justice. We believe that participation of our members is essential for the survival of democracy.

[northbayop.org](http://northbayop.org)