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Ventura and Santa Barbara County Realtors Announce \$650,000 Disaster Fund

Fire, Debris Flow victims eligible for up to \$3,000 rent or mortgage payment assistance

Residents of Ventura and Santa Barbara counties whose homes or rentals were destroyed or severely damaged by the Thomas Fire and Montecito Debris Flow may be eligible for up to \$3,000 in assistance thanks to a disaster assistance program established by the affected region's three Realtor associations.

Beginning immediately, homeowners and renters left homeless by the debris flow and largest wildfire in recorded California history may apply for reimbursement of one month's mortgage or rent payment or \$3,000 – whichever is less – from the Santa Barbara Association of Realtors, the Ojai Valley Board of Realtors, or the Ventura County Coastal Association of Realtors.

The three local associations joined together and received a total of \$650,000 from state and national Realtor housing assistance funds – enough to assist more than 200 families, said Matt Capritto, President of the Ventura County association.

“The fire and debris flow destroyed more than 700 homes in our region, including the home my father had lived in for 45 years. Many of the families affected have been utilizing savings and credit cards to stay afloat and are facing financial hardship. Area Realtors want to continue helping the disaster victims, and this is a great way we can do so,” Capritto said.

Andy Alexander, President of the Santa Barbara Association, said the need is particularly acute for victims of the debris flow in Montecito, caused when heavy rains in January washed tons of mud and rock from fire-scarred hillsides into the community below. The disaster killed 21 people, injured 28 more, and damaged or destroyed more than 380 homes.

“Many homeowners are covered by insurance that may pay for housing for up to two years following the disasters, but there are many who may have inadequate insurance or may not receive insurance reimbursement at all. People who lost their homes have lost everything. They are starting over from scratch and they need our help,” he said.

Victims can download application forms at www.vcrealtors.com/community-info/thomas-fire.html, www.sbaor.org/membercenter/realtor-disaster-relief-program/ or www.ojavalleymls.com. Applicants will need to complete an application, provide a copy of their mortgage statement or rental agreement, which both must include contact information for the lender or landlord, and proof of damage to their primary residence. Each of the three AORs will assess applications and hope to disburse all the funds within three months.

None of the funds will go to administration costs – all will be disbursed to victims, said Ojai Valley association president Sharon MaHarry.

“Now that the immediate shock and danger of the disasters are over, our Associations are looking forward to how we can help in the long term,” MaHarry said. “Realtors want to give back to the communities we live in and serve.”

Realtors in both counties have been helping victims since the Thomas Fire broke out on Dec. 4. The associations quickly established a public online rental portal which became the top websites to find temporary housing. And in addition, associations and individual Realtors started clothes drives so disaster victims, who lost everything, could get the necessities such as clothes and shoes.

The Thomas Fire broke out on the evening of Dec. 4 and wasn't 100 percent contained until Jan. 20. It burned 281,893 acres and destroyed 1,063 structures and damaged another 280. More than 735 homes were destroyed. In all, the Thomas Fire and Montecito Debris Flow caused more than \$1.5 billion in damage and caused property values to plummet by more than \$1.3 billion.

The Realtors' Relief Foundation, an arm of the National Association of Realtors, contributed \$500,000 to the fund. The California Association of Realtors' Housing Affordability Fund contributed the remaining \$150,000.

About the associations: The **Ventura County Coastal Association of Realtors** is a professional trade association of nearly 2,000 licensed real estate agents in western Ventura County, including the cities of Ventura, Oxnard, Camarillo, Santa Paula, Fillmore and Port Hueneme. The **Santa Barbara Association of Realtors** represents approximately 1,200 members from all real estate specialties including residential sales, commercial sales, development, property management and appraisals within the South Coast of Santa Barbara. The **Ojai Valley Board of Realtors** has promoted home ownership in the Ojai Valley, from Casitas Springs, Foster Park, Oak View, Meiners Oaks, City of Ojai and Upper Ojai areas, since 1962. Learn more online at www.vcrealtors.com, www.sbaor.org, and www.ojaivalleymls.com.