

Training for Dixie Fire survivors sheds light on the long road to recovery

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A hillside scorched by wildfire. Credit: Hannah Dancy/NCDP

Deep within the Sierra Nevada mountains, Greenville is a small town of about 1,100 people in the northern part of Plumas County, California. It was founded in the era of the Gold Rush—a mining settlement turned logging settlement turned historical landmark, known for its well-preserved 19th-century storefronts and century-old ranches. That is, until the summer of 2021 put Greenville on the map for something else: a town torn down by the Dixie Fire.

Now, one year later, the community in Greenville is working to rebuild. On July 13, experts from Columbia Climate School's National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) visited Plumas County to help inform their recovery efforts and co-host the in-person training, "Planning for Transitional and Long-term Housing After a Major Disaster."

The training was organized and conducted in partnership with the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES), the Plumas County Planning Department, the Dixie Fire Collaborative, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It was also coordinated by the FEMA State Administrative Agency training point of contact. It focused on providing community stakeholders and emergency service practitioners with additional resources to facilitate post-disaster recovery, including implementing federal assistance and coordination with outside partners. The training was followed by a [panel discussion](#) with local and state-level subject-matter experts.

A town in limbo

For Plumas County, the Dixie Fire was a worst-case scenario of exceptional drought, unfavorable winds, and bone-dry vegetation. The

fire started when a tree came into contact with a power line owned and operated by Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E). It took firefighters three months to extinguish, at which point over one million acres of land had burned—an area larger than the size of Rhode Island. Some 1,200 buildings, including over 650 homes, were damaged.

The NCDP team traveled to Plumas County a day before the training to visit some of the burn sites and talk to those still living in Greenville. The town itself is in a relatively remote part of California, about a two-hour drive from Reno, Nevada. Little, if any, rebuilding has taken place in the last year, in part because construction materials and manpower are not readily available. Many residents are also in limbo, waiting on the final settlement from PG&E before they sell their property. Those who want to stay are struggling to learn processes and paperwork to qualify for and access available disaster recovery funds from various sources.

"Disasters change the whole dynamics of a community," said Jeff Schlegelmilch, director of the NCDP and one of the training instructors. "Greenville is trying to plan, but there are still a lot of questions in terms of what can be rebuilt and how."

Schlegelmilch described meeting one business owner in town who was further along in the process than most. On a picnic table, the man laid out all the different sets of paperwork that he would have to complete—11 forms in total. Each form represented weeks and even months of work and waiting for signoffs before rebuilding could start.

"That was one of the best visualizations of what a survivor has to go through and why we see such disparities in the capacity to cope," said Schlegelmilch. "Those who are the most marginalized, those who maybe have the least resources, are being asked to do an incredible amount."

Tailoring the technique

The trainings that NCDP provides in concert with FEMA are intended, in part, to help minimize the impact of the bureaucratic burden placed on communities at risk of disaster events by preparing communities before disasters arrive. The training in Plumas County, however, was something of a departure from the NCDP's usual process. Instead of equipping communities with the tools to respond to a future disaster event, the disaster had already happened—and is still happening, said Hannah Dancy, project coordinator at the NCDP. The destruction of Greenville's nearby forest has also taken infrastructure with it. The loss of vegetation has made landslides and flash floods more likely. And survivors are grappling with the trauma of losing their livelihoods in real-time.

The NCDP team was first contacted about providing post-disaster training by the lead coordinator of housing recovery for Cal OES, Robyn Cole. She wanted to not only support the recovery efforts in Plumas County, but also foster interactions between the counties affected by the Dixie Fire. With this goal in mind, Dancy worked closely with Cole and other local stakeholders to alter the structure of an existing NCDP training model and ensure the right people were in the room to engage. Participants completed several course modules online prior to attending the in-person session, freeing up the back half of the day for a more event-specific dialogue about the Dixie Fire and how to navigate its fallout.

"The goal of this course was really to create discussions between the people who had been working to recover these communities," said Dancy.

As opposed to asking participants what they would do when faced with a hypothetical disaster, as is common practice in other NCDP trainings, the facilitators asked participants about their current needs. Representatives from other recovering communities like Paradise,

destroyed in 2018 by the Camp Fire, were also in attendance and able to share their knowledge with representatives from Plumas County.

"A lot of our role was to understand the dynamics, support where we can, and then know when to step back to let those conversations happen," said NCDP instructor Vanessa Lindley.

One of Schlegelmilch's favorite moments of the training was when Lindley presented a module about fostering leadership within the community. Rather than explain what participants should be doing, she named several people in the room who were already doing it—uplifting and celebrating their dedication to Plumas County's recovery efforts. In Greenville Elementary School, now surrounded by empty plots and charred mountains, it was a reminder of what—and who—had brought them all together that day.

A whole-community approach to recovery

With every training that they organize, the NCDP considers how to ensure that the intentions of and resources provided by the federal government are being realized at the local level.

"I always think: Are we leaving more value than we're taking?" said Schlegelmilch. "If participants would have had this time to work through the paperwork on their picnic table, would that have been time better spent?"

Schlegelmilch noted that the NCDP team did receive an outpouring of positive feedback following the training. The team was quick to attribute that response to their partnerships with local and state emergency practitioners, whose meaningful relationships with the communities represented helped set the training up for success.

"Having decision makers, stakeholders, and people with resources [in the room] added another element of hope and the opportunity to create solutions," said Lindley.

The multi-level coordination in Plumas County offers a glimpse into what an effective, whole-community approach to disaster recovery could look like. The [training](#) also underscored the prospective benefits of investing in disaster case managers—designated staff who would manage the logistics of a recovery process—and creating peer networks to exchange resources and first-hand experiences.

As [climate change](#) increases the frequency and intensity of extreme weather, these kinds of support systems, as well as trainings like the one held in Plumas County, will only become more important. "The disasters we experience in the future are going to be nothing like the ones we've seen in the past," said Dancy. "We need to focus not only on how we can rebuild communities faster but also on how we can protect them, make them more resilient so that we're minimizing the rebuilding process in the first place."

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