

08 How to Organize After Megafire

EIGHT PRINCIPLES FOR THE BLOCK / ZONE CAPTAIN SYSTEM

This is your recovery to lead. The Block & Zone Captain System is how survivors move information, advocacy, and power between neighborhoods and the officials deciding what comes next.

8+
FIRES DEPLOYED

50K
STRUCTURES

~25%
GROUP SAVINGS

'17–'26
YEARS ACTIVE

Why Organize

Recovery after wildfire is long and complex. It takes survivors, local government, nonprofits, and the private sector in the same room having honest conversations. The Block/Zone Captain system lets individual needs get addressed while the whole neighborhood leverages its collective power — and local staff, stretched by an emergency workload they have never faced, get one organized partner instead of a thousand separate calls.

~25%
saved through mass tree removal, shared surveying, and group contractor rates

1,300+
structures organized into 5 named areas in Coffey Park, Santa Rosa

1 Voice
your zone captain carries issues to officials — and brings answers back

What a Captain Does

Represents a block — a volunteer rebuilders serving as the communications hub for a defined group of homes.

Checks in and listens — contacts households, empathizes, helps find answers.

Learns as a generalist — shares the rebuild process with the zone and other captains.

How Information Actually Flows

Without a captain system, every household negotiates the whole system alone and every agency hears noise. With one, questions travel up a short chain and answers travel back down the same chain — so an answer given once reaches a hundred homes.

WITHOUT CAPTAINS 400 households × 400 separate calls. Same question asked 400 times. Answers arrive uneven, late, or not at all. Rumor fills the gap.	WITH CAPTAINS 400 households → 20 captains → 1 table. One answer, distributed once, reaches everyone the same week.
---	---



Why It Works

EFFICIENT One answer serves a whole zone. Staff review permits instead of repeating themselves.	EFFECTIVE Patterns surface early, so problems get fixed system-wide rather than household by household.	DURABLE Trust, relationships, and know-how outlast the fire — the soft infrastructure recovery runs on.
---	---	---

Principles 01—04

01

Map & Zone

Look at a map of the damaged area and divide it into groupings. Coffey Park used five numbered areas. Paradise used its existing evacuation zones. Give them names people remember, then let volunteer captains sign up for smaller sections within each area.

02

Recruit Captains

Captains who are fire survivors carry built-in trust. In Coffey Park's Area 1, all six volunteer captains were rebuilders themselves. Lived experience is the foundation of every captain program.

03

Build the Channels

Slack, a private forum, group SMS — and phone calls and postcards, because not everyone uses social media or a computer. Keep at least one channel for survivors only.

04

Set Norms Early

Who is in the group and who isn't? What language and behavior are appropriate? How is conflict handled? Threads get heated because this work is stressful and exhausting. Set the agreements at the beginning.

PROVEN IN THE FIELD

Used across 8+ megafires since 2017 — suburban Coffey Park numbered its five areas; rural Paradise used its existing evacuation zones. Both worked.

Principles 05—08

05

Meet on a Rhythm

Captains from every area meet weekly or bi-weekly. Always reserve at least half the time for the captain group alone — to compare notes, make plans, and address shared challenges together.

06

Pull Officials In

Invite planning and wildfire recovery staff to captain meetings. This system moves change from citizens to the officials who can act on it — your zone captain becomes your presenter.

07

Buy as a Block

Coordinate mass tree removal on private property, get records and surveying done together, and negotiate group rates when sharing contractors. This is where the ~25% comes from.

08

Pass It Forward

Document what worked and hand it to the next zone, the next fire. The situation is complex and fluid — it is a marathon, not a sprint, and adaptability is a key component of resilience.

ALSO A CAPTAIN'S JOB

Nurture connection and free up staff: neighbors solving problems together, celebrating progress together — and fewer one-off calls to the permit counter.

Essential Tips for Organizing

Experiencing loss from wildfire is devastating — the trauma, the material loss, the unknowns ahead. That is exactly why connecting with others matters. By sharing your problems, you can also find information and form solutions together.

- 01 Find people — that alone is a challenge — and invite them to get organized with you.
- 02 Recruit volunteer block/zone captains and give them a dedicated communications plan.
- 03 Define who you are organizing and what problems you share — and which problems are not yours to solve.
- 04 Invite people to meetings and events — in person, virtual, or both — to share and to gather information.
- 05 Create consistent channels. Not everyone uses social media; not everyone uses a computer. A phone call or a postcard still works.
- 06 Establish norms so channels are safe places to share without fear of personal attack — for captains and for the wider network.
- 07 Keep channels for survivors only, to share information and support one another.
- 08 Survey people and use the results to decide where to focus the work.
- 09 Leverage each volunteer's unique talents. Everyone has something to contribute.
- 10 Preserve privacy and earn trust.
- 11 Develop avenues for advocacy to those in leadership, and work collaboratively — with knowledge, caring, and respect.

It Is a Marathon, Not a Sprint. Adaptability Is a Key Component of Resilience.

Three Kinds of People Show Up

TO SELL

Vendors and contractors. Some are good. Slow down and check.

TO HELP

Neighbors and strangers stepping up because it's right. Hold onto this.

TO DEFRAUD

They will tell you to settle, sell your land, or hand over a big check.

DO NOT PAY OFF YOUR MORTGAGE

No matter how much you want your life back, do not make quick decisions. This is a deeply traumatic event and urgency is the scam's favorite tool. Free financial navigation for anyone: **Here 2 Help — 1-855-HERE2HELP** (thank you, Fannie Mae)

From Survivors Who've Been There

- 01 Do not reinvent the wheel — look to wildfire survivor communities. We are not asking you for money, now or later.
- 02 "I don't know" are super power words. Be wary of anyone who claims to know it all — or who doesn't listen to you.
- 03 Ask for anything you need, and don't be afraid to be wrong. Do not worship perfection.
- 04 Don't try to do it alone. No one person, sector, or agency can carry most of this. Strong people still need rest, breath, and mental health care.
- 05 People are generally wonderful. Hold onto the love in the air — what Rebecca Solnit calls "A Paradise Built in Hell."

You Will Get Through It.

How? By going through it. You will not be alone — a vast, deep network of people is here to walk this with you, all the days and months and years ahead. There's a lot of hope in the dark.