

# Center opens to aid Bear Fire survivors



Micah and Reuben, two golden retriever comfort dogs from Lutheran Church Charities K-9 Comfort Ministry enjoyed pets and scratches from J.J. Stark-Modlin, left, and Olivia Kelly, right, who attended the Bear Fire one year anniversary remembrance event Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2021 at the Long Term Bear Fire Recovery Group Resource Center. (Kyra Gottesman/Mercury-Register)

By [Kyra Gottesman](#) |

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OROVILLE — The parking lot at Lakeside Plaza was busy Wednesday as Bear Fire survivors and supporters jockeyed vehicles into parking spaces. The crowd of individuals and families ebbed and flowed throughout the afternoon and early evening as people came together in commemoration of the tragedy, they all had in common: the 2020 fire that torched more than 300,000 acres devastating several mountain communities including Berry Creek and Feather Falls and killed 16 people.

“Today is the one-year anniversary of the fire and it’s about coming together to remember, share and support. It is also about showing this community, the survivors their new resource center,” said Jake Fender, program manager for California Hope for Northern Valley Catholic Social Services.

The remembrance event was held from 2 to 7 p.m. in the new 2,000 square-foot Long Term Bear Fire Recovery Group Resource Center. While the center’s grand-opening is slated for Sept. 13,

Wednesday's "pre-opening" event included catered food from La Familia in Chico and Wagon Wheel in Oroville.

"We had more than 200 people come through," said Fender.

In addition to food, emergency preparedness kits, new socks, hand sanitizer, gas cards were also being distributed. Survivors could also speak to crisis counselors and each other support resource people during the event.

"We lost everything except our kids and our dogs. We're back up on the hill living on a friend's property. It's a long way for us to go all the way to town for things and to meet with people who can help us. Having this center here is going to help. We just want our lives back," said Toby Bond, a Berry Creek resident who attended Wednesday's event with his wife Bobbie Zedaker and their three children.

Among those who dropped in at the event were Butte County District 1 Supervisor Bill Connelly, Congressman Doug LaMalfa and Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea.

"Supervisor Connelly spoke and was very supportive and well received. He said a lot of positive things. He really connected with people. Congressman LaMalfa also stopped by and chatted with members of his constituency," said Fender.

Honea arrived with Sheriff's Office chaplains Ed Hall and Larry Bethune and spent his time talking with survivors and crisis counselors and other members of the recovery group.

"Obviously this is an important day. It's always sad when we have to come together as a community to commemorate something born from tragedy, but I felt it was important to be here to connect with the survivors, to talk with them about what they went through," said Honea.

In addition to enjoying food, connecting with one another and resource specialists and crisis counselors, survivors had the opportunity to visit with Micah and Reuben two golden retrievers that are part of Lutheran Church Charities K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry.

"They're beautiful," said Olivia Kelly who came with her co-worker J.J. Stark-Modlin on their lunch break from the Butte County District Attorney's Office.

"We just thought it was important to be here and show our support," said Kelly.

A small room was set aside with a table set up for rock painting to keep the kids and some adults entertained. Once the center is open that space will serve as a meeting room.

While survivors discussed their frustrations and needs with counselors and support staff, they also had a chance to share the positive with others. A large three-panel-poster board was set up so survivors could write and post on sticky notes what brings them hope.

“They’ve written like ‘a roof over my head,’ ‘my beautiful grandkids,’ ‘my family, friends and fur babies,’ ‘community support’ and ‘life!’” said Norma Lacy, Northern Valley Catholic Social Services case supervisor pointing to some of the sticky notes.

Once the center opens it will be staffed by crisis counselors who will be able to assist survivors with “light emotional support,” filling out forms, using the center’s computers, accessing internet, getting limited necessities and other resources. The space will also provide room for case managers and other service providers to meet with clients.

“It’s a community space for them to use. It’s centrally located at the cross roads that survivors from the Berry Creek and Feather Falls areas have to pass to go to town or just stop at for gas and groceries at Lakeside Market. It’s a central location that’s closer to town for them,” said Fender.

The Bear Fire Long Term Recovery Group is a collaborative of more than 30 individuals and agencies that have come together to support survivors. In addition to Northern Valley Catholic Social Services and Cal Hope, members include Butte 2-1-1, Oroville Hope Center, Haven of Hope on Wheels, St. Vincent de Paul, Oroville Hope Center and United Way of Northern California among others.

The resource center is located in the Lakeside Plaza, 5250 Olive Highway, Suite J. Hours of operation are Monday through Friday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. For more information visit the recovery group Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/bearfireltrg> or call the Hope Line at 815-1920.