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Poplar facing roadblocks in recovery effort

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POPLAR – “It’s like a little ghost town out here,” said Mari Perez-Ruiz, executive director of Central Valley Empowerment Alliance as she talked about Poplar almost three weeks after the devastating July 9 rouge fire that took several businesses, homes and vehicles. “This business center was the hub of the town. It’s not as lively anymore.”

People continue to drive by respectfully, she said.

But there are no more people running into the bakery on their way to or from work to buy fresh bread or pan dulce (sweet bread) from Gregorio and Sylvia’s La Potosina Panaderia bakery, no more people asking for meat at Hector Cabrera’s Carniceria market, no one getting beauty products or having their hair cuts at the hair salon, and no quick stops to pick up last minute items from Adam’s Market. And of the 12 people displaced by the fire when it engulfed their homes, most are still without a place they can call home.

On Friday, several business owners and their families who lost their businesses and homes in the fire met with Perez-Ruiz, Arturo Rodriguez, communications and organizing director of Central Valley Empowerment Alliance, Tulare County Supervisor Dennis Townsend, Tule River Economic Development Corporation Chair Isaac Manuel, members of the Grace Project, and other volunteers at the Larry Itliong Research Center, which was also damaged in the fire.

“It was all about circling back and crossing all the T’s,” said Perez Ruiz. “We met to talk on how we can be creative in providing supplemental services.”

And clean-up is essential.

“If Tulare County can’t pick up the cost of the cleanup, maybe they might be able to come in and do some of it,” Perez-Ruiz said. “We had the meeting to assess fire (damage) and talk to the folks that have been displaced. They had a chance to hear in person the extent of the damage impacting

families and the community.”

They provided referrals to various organizations including United Way, CSET — Community Services Employment Training, and others.

“We reached out to all different organizations in Tulare County and those listed under Tulare County Health and Human Services,” said Perez-Ruiz. “We’ve been hitting road blocks. They don’t qualify for any of the services.”

Townsend was requested to facilitate allocating FEMA — Federal Emergency Management Agency — trailers to use as shelter for the displaced families.

“He said he would follow up and see about abilities to get creative with what the County has available,” she said. “But none of the residents qualify for traditional help — either they don’t have minors living in the home; needed documents were lost in the fire; and they did not lose their homes to COVID. We can’t tap into those services.”

Perez-Ruiz said they also asked about Room Key and Home Key options. The first has to do with temporary, two to three days, emergency housing in a motel, and the latter is transitional housing at the State or Federal level when they buy motels for temporary housing.

“We were told Room Key is dwindling and there are no Home Key rooms available. Some are but are not habitable,” Perez-Ruiz said. “We thought three would qualify for housing for disability but because they had already been diagnosed as permanently disabled, they did not qualify. It’s one roadblock after roadblock. It is discouraging, when we go from one place to another. There are best intentions but no matter where we look, nothing. Hoping perhaps the discussions with Board of Supervisors and Tule River will help.”

It’s also discouraging, she said, because it has been three weeks and they’re still waiting on State Senator Melissa Hurtado, who grew up in the Central Valley, and is a daughter of immigrant parents, to visit. An original visit for July 15 fell through.

“We did hear from Senator Feinstein’s representative in the district and from Governor Newsom’s office. Someone will be coming to assess the damage (Wednesday),” Perez-Ruiz said.

And Feinstein’s representative did say he would help expedite Anees Muthana’s passports which were lost in the fire.

Muthana had just returned from a three-month trip to Yemen the day of the fire. He was in the process of making arrangements for his family to join him.

“Senator Feinstein’s (representative) said the County needs to kick off by asking up the channel,” Perez-Ruiz said. “Then they can get creative.”

The process for allocating funds was explained, she said, and goes from County to State to Federal. However, in order to qualify for FEMA, there has to be a certain number of acres burned.

“Our main concerns right now is clean-up, and that people have a place for more stable housing,” Perez-Ruiz said. “It was very promising with Senator Feinstein and the Governor’s office. Maybe they will find more resources that are less restrictive — whether to help with cleanup or provide housing.”

She said she believes things will be better once the clean up process begins.

“One thing that was encouraging for me on a personal level is a conversation by two business owners. Aziz (Hassan) said he was talking to Anees and showed him a sketch he had drawn on what he wanted for the new store,” Perez-Ruiz said.

“He was thinking ahead. Even in the midst of all this — it’s encouraging for me.”

A gofundme page has been set up at <https://gofund.me/f41bc22f>