

L.A. fires inspire unprecedented turnout of volunteer support for victims

By Rachel Swan, *Reporter*



Simi Valley Corvette Club member Dale Pitman donates snacks to firefighters working the Eaton Fire in Altadena on Tuesday.

Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

Winds were picking up Tuesday morning as Dale Pitman nosed his Ram 2500 pickup through the fire-scarred hillsides of Altadena, its bed piled high with protein bars.

He pulled up to Station 66, a tiny firehouse behind a National Guard checkpoint draped with caution tape. Tables outside were laden with donated food for the firefighters — bulk boxes of crackers, chewy candies, sanitary wipes, bottled water and browning bananas.

With parts of the Los Angeles area still smoldering from a string of wildfires that have incinerated homes, taken lives and displaced thousands, desperate residents rallied on social media. In a span of days they formed a vast donation and transport network from delicate architecture: information spread by word of mouth among people with good intentions, some of whom own big cars and don't mind driving across town.

The patchwork of support, with no single organization or leader steering it, has provided fire victims and first responders throughout Los Angeles County with not only essential needs but a sense of hope, and endurance, as neighborhoods continue to burn.



Firefighter Scott Brown accepts donated items from Collins & Katz Family YMCA in Los Angeles for fire personnel working the Eaton Fire in Altadena on Tuesday.
Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

“Several times a day people come up, just wanting to donate supplies,” said Scott Brown, a firefighter who lives in Eaton Canyon, an area scorched by out-of-control flames last week.

They have set up shop all over Los Angeles, converting backyards, synagogues and parking garages into makeshift distribution centers, handing out everything from socks to shovels to baby diapers. In Mar Vista, a homeowner turned her in-law unit into a pantry for donated cat and dog food. A small army of truck and van owners drives from one fire station or supply depot to the next, making deliveries.

Among them is Zack Dinh of Long Beach, who's spent the last few days roaming the city in his white 1991 Toyota pickup.

“At first, people wanted hygiene products, clean underwear, socks” — basic survival items, Dinh said. Then he began dropping off provisions for firefighters, who needed “jerky and other high-calorie snacks.”

On Tuesday morning, Dinh answered a social media callout for drivers from Squirrel Concepts, an auto shop for vintage Toyotas. Within hours he had new marching orders to load up his truck with bag after bag of dog food, intended for pets displaced by the blazes. Dinh hauled the bags to Labelle Foundation animal rescue in Mid-City, where another volunteer driver, Sam Homae, rolled up in a hatchback also filled with dog food.



A truck filled with pet food from Labelle Foundation in Los Angeles is ready to be delivered to fire victims on Tuesday.

Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

“Every little bit helps,” Homae said, wiping sweat from his brow as he lugged 50-pound bags from the trunk.

At one site, the Collins & Katz Family YMCA in Sawtelle, people lined up for half a block to help sort through donations. Coordinators in orange vests led them into a parking structure where boxes of toiletries, canned foods and stuffed animals lined the floors. Staff had posted a wish list on a white board outside, asking for instant ramen and gallon plastic bags, among other things.

Although the YMCA has a long history of turning its buildings inside out to assist with disaster relief, administrators said they had never seen it on the scale of this week’s response to the fires. Upward of 400 people swarmed into Collins & Katz over the weekend, said Aaron Donahue, executive director of the branch.



Collins & Katz Family YMCA volunteers sort clothing donations for fire visitors in Los Angeles on Tuesday.

Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

“People jumped into action — it’s more volunteers than we’ve ever had at a time,” Donahue said, noting that his YMCA branch is now the one closest to the wildfire in Pacific Palisades, which as of Tuesday morning had burned 23,713 acres and 5,300 structures — including the Palisades YMCA.

Chris Henry, a hotel consultant from Cheviot Hills, said he'd spent 9½ hours Monday organizing and boxing clothes, shoes and pet food at the Collins & Katz YMCA. He worked alongside middle school students, young children and their parents and two people with splints on their arms. Everyone, it seemed, had found public service as an antidote to growing despair.

"I'm a born-and-raised Angeleno, and I have to do my part for the city," said Henry, who returned for another day of work Tuesday. He had already opened his home to friends who had to evacuate from wildfires in Brentwood.

"I had four adults, a baby, three dogs and a cat all staying with me," Henry said.

By late afternoon Tuesday — the eighth straight day of blazes charring Los Angeles County — the magnitude of need seemed to be growing. Volunteer transporters had long itineraries: hard hats to surveyors trying to revive power lines in Altadena; pizzas from a restaurant in Beverly Hills to a YMCA in Koreatown; more granola bars and bottled water for first responders.

Fatigue seemed almost inevitable. But Brown, the firefighter from Eaton Canyon, saw at least a little cause for optimism.

"COVID really separated everyone, and now people are starting to come together," he said. "I see it throughout the day. Regular people, cleaning downed trees from the streets, seeing the need and wanting to help."

It could be an ingrained survival instinct. When the Eaton Fire erupted last week, Brown said he rushed from the restaurant to reinforce his home by hosing down plants, turning on sprinklers and removing flammable debris. Then he did the same for his neighbors.