Los Angeles Pierce College Serving as a Red Cross Evacuation Center

What began as a simple “ask” turned into a community affair

“The Hill Fire” and the “Woolsey Fire,” pushed by Santa Ana Winds, have swept through tens of thousands of acres in Ventura and Los Angeles Counties with alarming speed, dislocating about 235,000 residents in our surrounding communities.

On Thursday, November 8, 2018, at approximately 10:00 PM, the American Red Cross contacted Los Angeles Pierce College and asked if it could establish an Emergency Evacuation Center on campus. They initially thought the Center would draw between 60 and 100 people. In coordination with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, arrangements were made, and Red Cross personnel began to arrive around 11:00 PM. At that time, we were asked if we might be able to take “a few more” evacuees who were being moved from a nearby Evacuation Center that had reached capacity.

By midnight, Los Angeles County had issued a mandatory evacuation order for tens of thousands of additional residents in nearby communities. This order, coupled with Ventura County’s orders, included more than 80,000 individuals. By 1:00 AM, there were 800 evacuees at Pierce College. We opened one of our gyms, and then another,
to take in our neighbors. By dawn, there were over 1,100 evacuees on our campus, either in one or the other of our two gyms, in our largest conference center, or just sleeping in their cars in one of our parking lots.

With an ever-growing number of evacuees flowing onto campus, including many who were our own students, there grew an almost chaotic environment that caused us to grow concerned for the safety of the evacuees. In consultation with LACCD Chancellor Francisco Rodriguez, the campus was ordered closed for classes and activities on Friday.

Faculty and staff arriving Friday morning volunteered to assist and were pressed into service alongside the Red Cross. More than 250 faculty, staff, and students spent some, or part, of their holiday weekend serving and comforting the evacuees and provided support services for the Red Cross. We had several people who stayed on site for the first 22 hours straight.

There were faculty and staff volunteering 12 and 18-hour shifts to make certain no one was hungry, cold, or left alone.

As word spread that there were three Red Cross Evacuation Centers at Pierce, donations began coming in from local businesses. Ralphs Supermarkets sent an 18-wheeler from their distribution center in Riverside filled with food, hygiene products, and baby food. The Vons grocery chain provided badly needed fresh food and staples. The Home Depot sent pallets of bottled water and farm supplies. AT&T and T-Mobile parked mobile charging stations outside one of the gyms and passed out free communications
equipment. And, State Farm set up pop-up tents and provided food and snacks at a critical juncture. Operation Blankets of Love provided bags of pet food and dog crates, local restaurants sent meals, and on and on. Neighbors, who have asked to remain anonymous, rolled through campus for four days asking what the evacuees needed, and returned later with cars and trucks filled with water, diapers, clothing, shoes, and toys.

The response from local officials was astonishing. Woodland Hills City Councilman Bob Blumenfield spent most of Saturday on campus, comforting those fleeing the fires, and, with his staff, collected donations of personal items including food, toiletries, and clothing. State Senator Henry Stern stayed on site much of Saturday evening where he toured the facilities and sat with evacuees, providing them updates and information regarding their towns and neighborhoods at the front line of the ongoing fire disaster.

Early Sunday morning, Mayor Eric Garcetti made an unpublicized visit to the campus without media. He was scheduled for a ten-minute briefing with campus and Red Cross personnel. He stayed for nearly two hours. He met with evacuees, provided them with the most up-to-date fire evacuation information, and visited the “residence halls” where he and I talked with evacuees privately for much of the time he was on campus.

On Sunday, LACCD Chancellor Francisco Rodriguez visited campus and spoke to the evacuees at dinner. LACCD Board President, Michael Fong, toured the campus earlier on Monday, and Trustee Scott Svonkin visited with evacuees on Monday. I cannot begin to thank the Pierce staff to the degree they deserve. There are not words in the English language that can convey my depth of
gratitude. The custodial staff at Pierce worked non-stop, keeping the restrooms and showers clean and stocked, and the common areas neat and tidy. Our Equestrian Center faculty and staff, in partnership with the City and County of Los Angeles, tended to evacuated horses and livestock around-the-clock. Faculty and staff directed people to appropriate facilities, unpacked donations, helped the Red Cross with serving meals, and of course, offered comfort and encouragement.

One story that sums up the past five days involves the Pierce College Men’s Volleyball Team. On Saturday, the team arrived on campus to coordinate a trip to San Diego where they were scheduled to participate in an offseason tournament. When the coach and players gathered outside the gym, they found their practice facility packed with cots and frightened neighbors. The players changed their plans instantly. For the next two days, Coach Lance Walker and his players hauled water and food across campus and provided ride services for evacuees. A *Sports Illustrated* correspondent was on campus on Saturday covering how colleges and universities were responding to the fires. When the correspondent asked Coach Walker what had compelled his players to surrender their holiday weekend, he responded, “Some things are more important than us playing volleyball.”

Equally amazing were the people of our community. Not only was there a steady stream of cars dropping off donations, but dozens stayed to volunteer their time and many coordinated further donations that came in from across the city.

While the fires are still raging, and the need is still great, the spirit of service on our campus remains undiminished. Most of the evacuees have returned home, or in worse case scenarios, been moved to other temporary housing due to
their homes having been destroyed. One of our shelters remains open, and we will continue to provide our assistance to the Red Cross until this crisis ends.

Classes resumed today with many tired faculty, staff, and administrators reaching deeper for the stamina to get through this week in service of our 11,000 regular students. There has been little time to share what has been happening here at Los Angeles Pierce College these past few days, but I’m taking some bit of time now to share how proud I am of all who have come together here ... proving that Pierce College is not simply a college in its community; rather, it is the community’s college.

Best regards,

Lawrence G. Buckley, PhD
Los Angeles Pierce College
Interim President

If you wish to make a monetary donation, I ask that you consider contributing to the Pierce College Foundation and the American Red Cross of Los Angeles.