

Flood of support



Kirsti Thompson, Julia Stermer, Kinsey Cohen, Calleen Pardinas, Vanessa Bechtel, Sylvia Barron, Aidan Miner, Cuca Ruiz and Tracy Tagawa outside the VCCF offices in Camarillo. (Alex Wilson)

Ventura County Storm Fund helps local flood victims ineligible for federal aid

By Alex Wilson

Bob Myers was asleep in his bed at 2:05 a.m. on Dec. 21 when he was awakened by an extremely unusual noise.

"It sounded like you were standing at a river where there were rapids, is what it sounded like. I threw the covers off and stepped out, and I was knee deep in water," said Myers, 67, during a Feb. 1 interview on the patio of his gutted single-story home in the Hueneme Bay senior community where he lived alone.

In his half-awake state, Myers initially thought a pipe might have burst and he started to worry about the hefty water bill he could be facing. When he made it to the hallway, Myers realized he had far bigger problems than that: Water was rushing into his home through the crack in the French doors leading to the patio. "The water was just coming through like somebody was standing there with a fire hose, big old fan spray coming through," he said while taking a much-needed break from the demolition work he was tackling all by himself.

The water pressure from outside was so strong Myers couldn't even turn the deadbolt on his front door. He perched on the kitchen countertop until the water receded later that morning, although he wasn't exactly sure what time he finally escaped his ruined home because his wet cell phone wasn't working. His Port Hueneme

neighborhood had just suffered through what National Weather Service officials described as "unprecedented" rainfall from a "supercell thunderstorm" amounting to over three inches in less than one hour, damaging 422 homes and 644 vehicles.

A long road back to normal

After the sun rose that morning, Myers began a long and difficult recovery process that still has no end in sight. He was thankful for the help from charities that responded to help out in the days immediately after the flood, including the American Red Cross and a veteran-led humanitarian group, Team Rubicon.

"They came in and helped people get the furniture out of their houses and tear up carpets and into the dumpsters. To me, they were sad days, watching your life go into a dumpster and headed for a landfill somewhere," he said, adding that all his possessions now fit in a dozen small packing boxes because that's all he was able to salvage.

The pain only multiplied when his home insurance company said they would not pay him anything because he, like most of his neighbors, wasn't insured for flooding since they didn't live in a flood zone. After moving into Hueneme Bay in 2018, Myers spent \$90,000 on renovations including plumbing and electrical work as well as new appliances that were destroyed. Myers fears bids for reconstruction will likely be in the range of \$150,000.

Government help fails to materialize

Weeks after the deluge, Myers and his neighbors learned they would not qualify for FEMA grants because that type of direct aid only kicks

in after more than 1,200 homes are damaged in a disaster, and the flooding in Port Hueneme and Oxnard didn't reach anywhere near that. But he and his neighbors were encouraged to apply for low-interest loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration.

"So far, every single person that I know of has been declined an SBA loan [because] basically their income is not high enough," Myers said. "Well, you're in a retirement community. Most of these people are well above 65, 70 years old. Maybe they don't have a big income." Myers continued that he and his neighbors were

disappointed to hear government aid was not forthcoming. "It made me feel like we were less than important, less than people, and like nobody cared. I don't care if it's only one person affected. How do you say, 'You don't matter because you're not big enough.'"

Before his retirement two years ago, Myers spent 35 years building and repairing pipelines for Southern California Gas Company.

"I was the guy that responded to stuff like this. Mudslides, earthquakes, fires, whatever," he said, while briefly appearing on the verge of tears. "It's a little emotional at times because I



Port Hueneme's Ray D. Pruetter Library remains closed for repairs after it was flooded on Dec. 21. (Alex Wilson)



Officials reported 644 vehicles were damaged by flooding in Port Hueneme and Oxnard on Dec. 21. (VCSD)

was always the one that people looked to for the answers. Now, I was completely on the other side of that equation, and I didn't even know what questions to ask, let alone have any of the answers. And, it really makes you feel alone."

Myers actually feels fortunate in some respects. He had purchased a new Honda Pilot TrailSport SUV in September that was totaled in his flooded garage, but since he carried comprehensive insurance coverage, he was able to drive off in an identical replacement about a month later. Many of his neighbors with ruined cars lacked that kind of coverage. Myers could also afford to rent a room from a friend to stay in while repairs are underway, but said several of his neighbors have continued living in their damaged homes, many with mold growing thicker by the day.

"I feel so sorry for them. My heart goes out to them because they have nowhere to go," he said.

While he's disappointed in the lack of help from the federal government, Myers did have praise for Port Hueneme city leaders, who arranged for dumpsters and debris removal that's still going on more than a month later.

"The city manager, James Vega, and the mayor, Misty Perez, at least they're talking to us. There's not a lot that they can do. But what they can do, they're on it," he said. "They are doing things to help people. Unfortunately, the help that most people need, in my opinion, is financial help."

City officials, VCCF step up

Vega just started his new job as Port Hueneme City Manager last July after holding the same position in Ojai. Since he grew up in South Oxnard, Vega was already well acquainted with the community he now serves. The VCReporter interviewed Vega in his office at Port Hueneme City Hall, which itself suffered flood damage along with the Ray D. Prueter Library, which remains closed for repairs.

Aside from dealing with immediate recovery needs such as clearing debris and getting trash containers in place, city leaders also started advocating for state and federal help right away, with the city council quickly passing an emergency declaration. When it became clear FEMA grants were not coming, Vega said he conferred with Oxnard City Manager Alex Nguyen and Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services Director Patrick Maynard. The three realized something else needed to be done besides seeking federal aid and reached out to a local charity, the Ventura County Community Foundation, for help raising and distributing private donations.

"We recognized that VCCF was an agency who has that capability. They do it all the time. They also have kind of a built-in network and everything else. So, we reached out to VCCF and asked if they would help us with it, and they've been great. They jumped right on it," Vega said.

On Jan. 24 VCCF started reaching out to donors to support the Ventura County Storm



Port Hueneme City Manager James Vega outside city hall on Feb. 1. (Alex Wilson)





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Bob Myers inside his gutted kitchen in Port Hueneme's Hueneme Bay senior community. (Alex Wilson)

Fund, and by Feb. 1 over \$260,000 had been collected. The charity is already in the process of distributing funds directly to flood victims.

Vega said he believes extreme weather events will become more frequent and widespread due to climate change, and federal disaster relief policies need to change with the times, too, so that more people are covered in less extensive calamities.

"There's this stat I've heard a few times that Ventura County is the fastest-warming county. And so, I think we're seeing these changes to our weather patterns," Vega said. "We need to all advocate to make those changes, because this stuff is probably going to keep happening. The 50-year-old federal requirements need to change to reflect that, or else cities like ours are going to keep getting impacted."

Taking the lead in taking in donations

Vanessa Bechtel is president and CEO of VCCF and shared her thoughts on launching the Ventura County Flood Fund with the VCReporter at the organization's headquarters in Camarillo. Bechtel said it saddened her to hear so many flooding victims would be ineligible for government aid.

"I think what I'm realizing now, in a more profound way, is just how inequitable it is. Because, you know, if I put myself in their shoes, if my whole neighborhood was wiped out, to me it would be a complete crisis, and I would expect

all of the assistance available to help me. But if it's not a large enough scale, there is nothing. And it just doesn't seem right," she said.

Bechtel said it was important for VCCF to respond and launch the Ventura County Flood Fund especially because so many flood victims are members of low income and elderly populations. "I don't know why this keeps happening, but it seems like these disasters are just disproportionately impacting our most vulnerable community members in terms of very, very limited resources and just fixed income, and just really struggling to make ends meet beforehand. So that's why, when we learned about that, we said we have to do something."

Bechtel said 100% of the donations collected will be used for immediate assistance. One challenge for the newly launched fundraising drive is that it comes more than a month after the disaster.

"Most of the time when it comes to raising money, about 75% of the dollars that come in will come in within the first 48 hours after a disaster," said Bechtel. "And so, we have to really mobilize philanthropy and say, 'Look, I know for you it was just rain. And it may have been really heavy rain. But for these families, it was like a tornado, and we have to do something.'"

Every donation counts, even small ones, Bechtel said, and it's not only the money that helps people; it's knowing other people care.

"You know, people often think, 'I can't do



Ripped out walls expose mold spreading in a bathroom at Hueneme Bay senior community. (Alex Wilson)

enough.' But one of the things that I just encourage us to all remember is the fact that we're not doing this alone," she said. "A lot of the gifts that have added up to this first \$260,000 are \$20 gifts, \$10 gifts. Every dollar makes a difference and sometimes we feel like we don't have enough to give or we're not able to give a lot. But when we all do our part, it all adds up. And I think that's what I would just really want to communicate is that it's deeper. It's not just financial assistance. It's also reminding people that we're all together, that they're not alone."

County OES seeks private help

Maynard was already familiar with VCCF from working with the nonprofit in the wake of previous disasters like the Thomas Fire.

"Knowing their past history and how hopeful they've been, I did reach out to the president and CEO of the foundation, Vanessa Bechtel, and said, 'Hey, here's where we are. Anything you can do in terms of your private donor network to assist our residents, you know, would be greatly appreciated.' Kind of let her know about the impacts and where a lot of the unmet needs are. And, they quickly jumped into action," Maynard said. "As that money is collected, we're working jointly with the foundation as well as the cities to really focus on how we want to see this money distributed. The goal is to make sure it's done as equitably as possible, but also as quickly as possible, because we know the people that are out there, you know, need assistance now."

Maynard said they know the needs are so great that it will be impossible to cover everyone's losses, but at least they can offer some immediate help.

"We're hopeful that we'll be able to distribute \$1,000 gift cards pretty soon here to those most severely impacted. And then as additional funds come in, we'll continue down the list of structures that were impacted. We're starting with the most severely impacted structures and then working our way down the list to those that were less impacted."

Maynard said part of the reason the VCCF was chosen as their partner for the endeavor was due to the charity's transparency, since details of what they take in and spend is on their website.

"I trust the foundation. The foundation has been there for our residents before, and I'm confident in their abilities to help us through this," Maynard said. "We'll be able to hopefully hand over some amount of money to every person impacted by the storm." ♦

To donate to the Ventura County Storm Fund and for more information, visit vccf.org/initiatives/ventura-county-storm-fund/.

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