

Fire victims get relief at Tustin Rescue Mission

Nonprofit facility is helping hundreds of residents hurt by the fires.

By ERIKA M. TORRES
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TUSTIN • After grocery shopping with her children one day last month, Renae' Brunning couldn't return home because of the Santiago fire. Two days later, her three-bedroom house in Modjeska Canyon burned down.

Donna and Bill Edney didn't lose their home, but the self-employed couple were unable to work for the two weeks that they were evacuated because of the fire.

Operation O.C. has been helping Brunning and the Edneys slowly get back on their feet by supplying them with food, gas cards and gift certificates.

For many residents affected by the fires, the need to pay their bills or buy necessities, such as food and toiletries, has led many to seek help from the Orange County Rescue Mission as part of Operation O.C., a partnership of Orange County nonprofits providing relief for fire victims.

The Rescue Mission on the former Marine helicopter base in Tustin has been providing more than \$5,000 a day in aid to residents affected by the fire, according to Jim Palmer, president of the Rescue Mission.

"People shake off the shock of what they've gone through," Palmer said, "And then stuff starts to catch up."

When Operation O.C. began Oct. 24, the Rescue Mission was helping only about 10 fire victims a day, Palmer said. The number has grown to about 40 a day, and the total number of people the Rescue Mission has helped from the fire has reached 335.

A lot of residents displaced by the fire are beginning to feel the sting on their pocketbooks - and their mentality.

"It's just been a whirlwind," Brunning,

How to help

The Orange County Rescue Mission needs donations of non-perishable food, gas cards and grocery gift certificates. Items and checks can be dropped off or sent to the Rescue Mission from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday at 1 Hope Drive, Tustin, 92782. Financial donations can be made online. Information: 714-247-4300 or www.operationoc.org.

38, said. "I just realized I'm really not looking forward to the holidays."

Another Modjeska Canyon resident, Debra Pardee, packed only a day's worth of clothing for her four-member family when they evacuated their home.

Eating out while they were evacuated, replacing about \$500 worth of food that spoiled and buying a week's worth of clothes for each family member has taken a toll on Pardee's credit cards.

And while she didn't lose her house, deciding whether to pay her credit card bill or buy groceries for the week has led her to seek help at the Rescue Mission.

"It's a little embarrassing taking the food," Pardee said. "(But) it helps me pay off the credit card bills."

Many residents have been hesitant about accepting help because they've never had to seek assistance before, Palmer said. But for many, the donations are helping them get by.

"We've never had to do this, we've always had our own money," Donna Edney said. "I've always donated, I've never taken ... so when I had to go down there (to the Rescue Mission), it was pretty hum-



HANDS ON: Jim Palmer, president of the Rescue Mission, stocks the shelves.

bling."

Edney and her husband lived with friends, and then rented a motel room for the last few days of the evacuation. Donna had to sell her horse, Reno, a gift from her stepson, to make ends meet.

Donna's hesitancy to accept the donations is an emotion that reverberates across the community.

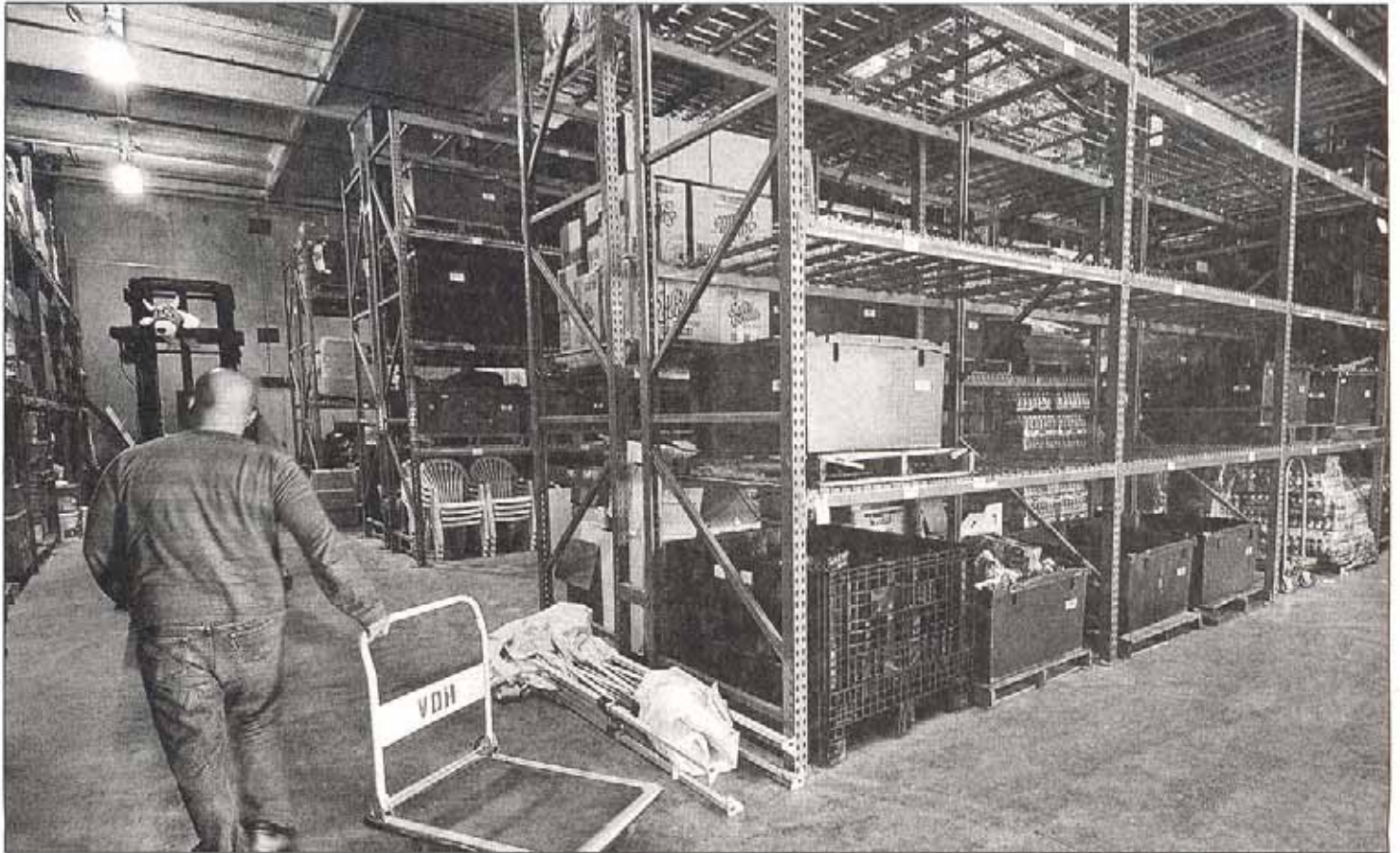
"I really struggle with going to (get help)," Brunning said. "You need the help, but you don't want to admit to it."

Operation O.C. was started so anyone really needing assistance could get it without having to wait to see if they qualify for government help, Palmer said. As long as victims' identities can be proven, everyone is eligible to receive donations.

Donations can be earmarked to benefit fire victims, Palmer said.

"We're not trying to create another large organization, but instead we're trying to empower every family in the county to be able to play a part in helping another family," he said. "We're trying to keep it at the grass-roots level of people helping people - that's the easiest way to do it."

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PHOTOS: JEFFREY ANTENORE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

PROVIDING HOPE: Joel Gumbayan, a case manager for the Rescue Mission, pulls a cart through the Village of Hope warehouse.