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Planning ahead to prepare for emergency evacuations vital- especially for non-drivers

By Pippa Fisher

With major fires burning all over the state, some close to home, and smoke blanketing Lamorinda most days as a daily reminder, the practicalities of exactly how to evacuate are a concern for many, especially older folks or others with limited mobility who don't drive. The message from emergency services is loud and clear. Think about it now.

"We strongly encourage seniors, those with access and functional needs (AFN), or who do not drive to develop a plan now," urges Lafayette Police Chief Ben Alldritt, explaining, "This includes identifying family, friends, or neighbors who are willing to be a part of your evacuation plan."

Alldritt encourages those in this group to consider leaving as soon as they receive an evacuation warning and not to wait for the evacuation order.

It is something the Lamorinda Community Emergency Response Team has thought about. It is addressed on page six in the Wildfire Preparedness and Evacuation guide - a booklet compiled by CERT with the police and fire departments - published last year and delivered to every home in Lamorinda. The guide is available online (see link below), and hard copies are available at city offices, police and fire departments, and libraries.

Additionally all residents should sign up for the Community Warning System (see link below). Lamorinda CERT Registrar Julie Luckenbach says this is the best thing residents can do and notes that in addition to email, Contra Costa County residents can also register many phone numbers to a single location, including their home phone and even their adult children living out of the area. "That way their children may get the alert even if their elderly parents miss it. Hopefully they can make a plan to be able to assist their parents," says Luckenbach.

During a recent virtual emergency evacuation drill held in Lafayette that suggested people check on their neighbors, Luckenbach says she wasn't sure how many people actually knocked on their neighbor's door at 7:30 a.m. on a Saturday "for a virtual evacuation and lived to tell about it! But now that the idea is out there, I feel that it would become a reality in the event of an actual fire evacuation situation."

Rose Brandt, a Lafayette resident in her 80s who does not drive and does not often use the internet, did not know about signing up for the CWS until her neighbor told her about it a few days before the drill. But Brandt has given consideration to evacuation and has made a plan with her neighbor.

CERT recognizes that this is the best step for AFN individuals. According to the guide, "Pre-determine who will help any AFN person evacuate and have a backup - family friends and neighbors who live very close by." The guide emphasizes that AFN individuals should not rely on first responders to evacuate them. "They may be overwhelmed."

Lamorinda Village, a community-based network that supports seniors to keep them in their own homes where possible, is partnering with CERT to work on a plan for its members.

"We both have two sides of the puzzle - Lamorinda Village has seniors who need help and CERT has many volunteers who would like to help when needed," explains Luckenbach. Together they are working on finding the CERT graduates who live near seniors in need.

Lamorinda Village Operations Manager Kathryn Ishizu says that every time there is smoke in the air, they have anxious seniors asking how Lamorinda Village can help.

"As we learned from the Paradise Fire, older adults are inordinately affected by fires as they have a harder time evacuating," says Ishizu. "We want to make sure that does not happen in our community."

Luckenbach cautions that this plan will only be available for Lamorinda Village members and that evacuation help would not be an activation of CERT - only neighbors helping neighbors.

"It gets tricky because we do not want to violate any privacies, and, since the CERTs will not officially be deployed as CERTs, they must act on their own as good neighbors," says Luckenbach. "Mostly, we want to facilitate a connection to foster a relationship and fulfill the evacuation needs of the seniors if we do need to leave the area."

Lamorinda CERT says everyone should have a plan and practice it. They encourage everyone to have a go-bag packed and ready.

"I love that Lamorinda Village got all of its members go-bags," says Luckenbach. (See Aug. 5 issue of Lamorinda Weekly for story.) Checklists and resources are available on the CERT website and in the Evacuation Guide to help people decide what to pack.

Luckenbach sums it up. "Knowing your neighbors and working together is a great way to help the community survive and ultimately recover from a disaster."

To view the Residents Guide to Wildfire Preparedness and Evacuation online, as well as for other useful links go to: <https://www.lamorindacert.org/resource/evacuate/>

To sign up for CWS alerts go to: <http://cococws.com/>

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