

## Red Cross Shelter Provides Comfort In Many Different Ways

By Aaron Litwin, American Red Cross, Bay Area Chapter

**Monday, July 14, 2008** — The American Red Cross continues to provide wildfire disaster relief in California, with 3 shelters currently open. Nearly 1,500 individuals have registered in the shelters since the wildfires began and a little more than 2,500 overnight stays have been provided. In addition, in excess of 7,000 meals have been supplied and more than 1,000 comfort kits distributed.

Margie McCool is one of the many people who have been affected by the wildfires. As the smoke thickened and fire approached the 86 year-old's home, a deputy sheriff knocked on the door with the startling news that she would need to evacuate. Right away. Margie lives alone in the small Northern California town of Paradise with her 2 cats Angel and Keeper. She quickly packed up her feline friends and headed to the nearest American Red Cross shelter.

Upon arrival at the Red Cross shelter at Neighborhood Church in nearby Chico, she was relieved to learn that Angel and Keeper would be looked after at the pet evacuation center next door managed by the North Valley Animal Disaster Group. "I am so grateful for everything the ladies are doing for my cats," said the silver-haired Margie, with a giggle and smile.

The Red Cross shelter has been providing Margie with many comforting services during her six day stay. Twice a day the Cal Fire Team updates shelter residents with the most current progress on the fire. Large maps show the fire's perimeter and those areas designated for mandatory and pre-cautionary evacuations.

Cal Fire Team representative Marc Hollen answers Margie's questions as well as fielding the dozens of others from the more than 100 Red Cross shelter residents. "We are lucky to have this Red Cross shelter for evacuees. As long as they are here, they are being taken care of and they are not endangering their lives or that of our firefighters," said Hollen.



Red Cross Shelter Resident Margie McCool visiting her cat Keeper at the co-located pet shelter. Photo by: Aaron Litwin

And now Margie turns her attention to meeting with Red Cross Case workers who will assess what level assistance is available and help her develop her recovery plan. The Red Cross provides individual assistance to clients based on verified disaster cause needs.



(from left to right) Red Cross spontaneous volunteer & Chef Siel-Hocine Smail cooking with the help of Red Cross volunteer Cathy Gallentine & Boy Scout Harrison Kelsey.

As Margie walks through the shelter on her way to visit her cats she is greeted with hug after hug from both volunteers and fellow residents. "I get so many hugs- I can't get enough."

It's the information, client services, creature comforts and volunteers all in one location at the Red Cross shelter that is helping make one of Margie's most difficult periods much more bearable. As she strokes the soft fur of her cat Angel sitting on her lap, Margie grins and says "my cats want to go home. But I wouldn't mind staying!"

And when it comes to food Margie is quick to say that "the meals are like a little touch of heaven." And that's no exaggeration. Spontaneous Red Cross volunteer Siel-Hocine Smail has been working in the kitchen 14 hours a day. He is a highly trained chef and nutritionist and has been making healthy meals for those residents with special dietary needs. "I make fresh, delicious and healthy dishes that you

only find in fine restaurants."

## **Collaboration in the Red Cross Kitchen**

Siel-Hocine Smail isn't your everyday kitchen worker. He was a Red Cross volunteer in his home country of Algiers and holds a Masters Degree in Food Science. And when he saw the recent evacuation orders he immediately sprung into action.

He has been spending 14 hours a day overseeing the creation of fresh and delicious meals for those with special dietary needs. "I make meals with gourmet ingredients that are well balanced," says Smail. "And they taste good. I play with taste to create variety for the residents."

Rounding out the Red Cross shelter feeding team are the Boy Scouts and the Sierra Foothills Southern Baptist Association. Through a nationwide partnership agreement, the Red Cross procures the ingredients. And then the Southern Baptist Association Feeding Team provides the kitchen and volunteers to turn everything into nutritious meals.

The collaboration between the Red Cross, Southern Baptists and other organizations like the Boy Scouts has resulted in a variety of freshly produced meals for shelter residents. "During a catastrophe there are a lot of unknowns," observes Smail. "But one thing they can count on is the consistent quality of our meals."