

MCKENZIE RIVER VALLEY WILDFIRE RECOVERY ASSISTANCE BACKGROUND | FINDINGS | OPPORTUNITIES

A planning research project provided by the Oregon Chapter of the American Planning Association, Community Planning Assistance Program, in service to Lane County and the McKenzie River Valley community.

Background

As the communities impacted by the Holiday Farm Fire have embarked on the recovery and rebuilding process, Lane County has been undertaking some of the initial groundwork needed for longer-term community decisions, project identification, and resilient recovery. The County is at a phase in recovery where it would be helpful to compile and analyze information survivors have provided to caseworkers, shelter staff, service providers, and others working closely with displaced survivors.

While 175,000 acres were burned in the Holiday Farm Fire, most of the land burned was rural, industrial timberland. However, along the McKenzie River, much rural housing was burned. Most of the McKenzie River Valley homes were built before the 1970s, prior to the establishment of the current Oregon land-use system and various health and environmental protection laws. These non-conforming uses and structures have different regulations around where and how rebuilding can occur. Furthermore, many McKenzie families lived in non-permanent structures, such as out-buildings, trailers, recreational vehicles, and other accessory structures as their homes, some through trading maintenance services in exchange for rent. These residents of non-permanent homes haven't received the same services as stick-built dwellings, manufactured homes, or permitted residences, nor have they been recognized as housing units, making them more challenging to access, track, and assist in a post-disaster situation. Additionally, there are no existing rural area or community plans to guide disaster recovery.

At the height of the timber industry in the early to mid-20th Century, the small towns along the McKenzie River would have been vibrant, with a population of 8,000 to 9,000 people living up the valley. These tiny towns had declined to a fraction of their timber-era population in recent decades, but still maintain a vibrant culture and tight community.

The area had also continued to serve as home to people living with low and fixed incomes and other circumstances that make recovery from the wildfire disaster very challenging. Pre-disaster, the median age of the displaced population is around 55 years old; many property owners inherited their residences, never having to apply for loans or a mortgage; with many more residing in non-permanent structures and vehicles.

To inform future services and distribution of resources, Lane County has engaged the Oregon American Planning Association's (OAPA) Community Assistance Planning Program (CAPP) to review data collected by the Oregon Department of Human Services and Oregon Health Authority in VisionLink ([see later in the report](#)) and interview case managers to document the ongoing needs of the Holiday Farm Fire's most vulnerable survivors and offer recommendations for improvements.

Key Findings

From March-May 2022, the CAPP team members analyzed information from survivors in VisionLink database and conducted four group interviews with 12 McKenzie River Valley area stakeholders, including survivors of the wildfire and community advocates, case managers, and shelter managers. Below lists the main themes and key takeaways CAPP team members gathered through the research and conversations:

Assistance and Help

- Help and assistance from outside sources (state and federal organizations) have been slow to materialize for many survivors.
 - Local agencies and communities were left to assist in emergency help without training or knowledge to deal with the issues in this type of emergency.
- There is no longer-term assistance (staff, funding, or other resources) to help community members navigate the additional systems to help rebuild.
 - For example: in the School District, the staff now has additional recovery-related work while working with a strained budget and declining student population (funding). There is no additional support from the State School Board or other agencies to assist staff.
 - It was reported that many community members with the most need have struggled to connect to the recovery system. Some are just now initiating the process of assistance when fewer resources remain.

- Inadequately trained recovery specialists were initially deployed to the community.
 - Many of the initial responders provided by the Red Cross lacked training in the type of trauma-informed care well-established in Oregon.
 - It was reported that fire survivors were hurt/retraumatized by initial relief groups and were deterred from returning for further recovery help.
 - Nationally trained relief organizations are not necessarily a better solution than locally trained relief organizations.

Who is left behind?

- **Lower- and middle-income residents**
 - Those who lost a home but had some savings - just enough money to disqualify them for some financial assistance. The cost of goods and home prices have increased over the last 18 months while their income has stayed the same, making new housing unaffordable. The lack of appropriate insurance coverage has further exacerbated their needs.
 - Many people lived in unpermitted housing on private properties (RVs, mobile homes, guest houses) and were not eligible to receive aid. Due to County code issues, these residents cannot rebuild or reestablish similar living quarters on the same properties.
- **“Off-grid” individuals**
 - People who lived in the area lived outside of established neighborhoods and other community systems. It is hard to know exactly how many people live like this, and many may be dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other mental health issues but thriving by their standards.
 - Many do not have internet or telephones, may not have IDs or any way for recovery agencies to know that they “exist,” and therefore, have had a more challenging time getting aid/support.
 - Many find it hard to engage with the systems they chose to live without before.
 - Outreach efforts are likely missing, and online-only engagement won’t reach them. The best way to contact them is through the mail, as many still have PO Boxes or other ways to get mail.

- **Seniors**
 - Do not use the internet, so online-only engagement will not work
 - Hard time navigating recovery systems, especially if it's online
- **Houseless individuals and families**
 - There was not enough regulated affordable housing for these individuals before the wildfires.
 - Lack of regulated and accessible affordable housing units for those with physical disabilities
 - It is hard to navigate complex recovery systems, especially if they have mental health struggles.

Lack of Emergency Preparedness in the Community

- Many people had homes were underinsured, especially those that lived in manufactured homes, not knowing they needed to update insurance plans from when they originally acquired their residence. For many insurance isn't enough to cover purchasing a new home, especially with increased pricing over the last 18 months.
- Case managers felt unprepared with no guides or plan to assist community and local organizations to respond quickly to the needed emergency response actions.
- Not all responders and service providers had adequate knowledge or training in trauma-informed care.
- There was no community vision in place before the emergency to enable a speedy, community-driven rebuilding process.

Difficulty Navigating Existing Systems

- For middle-income residents, many have never had to access these systems. For example, in SNAP, many were unaware of how to get assistance or where to go until much later in the recovery process.
- Homeless individuals with mental illness or mental disabilities - cannot always handle paperwork deadlines or stay on top of waitlists for permanent housing to get out of the emergency shelter - a common problem not just in this particular situation.
- For those who don't want to be on any systems and live "off-grid," the only way to get assistance is to engage with those systems, which can be extremely hard. Many of these individuals deal with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues that make navigating these systems hard.

Issues Exacerbated by COVID

- Lack of ability for the community to gather and provide support for each other, share information, or grieve together
- The cost of goods has increased.
- The prices of materials and homes have increased, making it harder to rebuild or buy a new manufactured home - even with insurance money or money from FEMA.

Permitting Issues within Lane County

- At the time of the CAPP interviews, over 70 lots had been sold by willing landowners, including those unable to handle the arduous permitting process for rebuilding.
- Many people living in unpermitted shelters/housing cannot rebuild or reestablish residence in the McKenzie River Valley.

Economic Development Issues

- Businesses continue to have trouble attracting and retaining employees exacerbated by a lack of housing, especially if available jobs have lower wages.
- The wildfires and COVID significantly impacted tourism-related businesses, such as fishing guides, lodges, and outfitters. The lack of workers has further complicated their ability to recover.

Opportunities and Recommendations

Survivors who are renters, displaced seasonal residents, local workforce, shelter residents, small businesses, and more have been absent from community planning efforts due to limited partner capacity and limited access for these populations. Therefore, these vulnerable populations are not well-represented in recovery processes but have been vital voices in the larger McKenzie community. This is particularly true for the residents living “off the grid” in trailers, outbuildings, and other un-permitted housing before the fire. There is no concrete data available regarding how many of these residents were displaced – because they occupied informal dwellings, they were not counted or assessed by the County – but based on the team’s interviews with caseworkers, this population of survivors is significant. The current recovery efforts vastly underserve them.

There is an overarching need for community visioning and approaches to collectively determine the long-term future of the McKenzie River Valley with meaningful engagement of these vulnerable groups. Typical community planning and engagement approaches are time-consuming for displaced wildfire survivors, and potentially re-traumatizing. Additionally, community members have expressed that they are fatigued from feedback sessions and surveys over the past year. Social workers and other service providers have interviewed and conversed with many survivors absent from ongoing planning processes; their gathered information is highly relevant to understanding the needs and planning directions for the most vulnerable community members impacted by the fire.

Based on the data reviewed and the interviews conducted, the OAPA CAPP team offers the following opportunities and recommendations for improvements:

Recommendations for Community Visioning + Resiliency Planning

Establish a long-term recovery plan with a comprehensive vision of hope and inclusive of the full range of Holiday Farm survivors.

- Undertake a community process to establish an integrated plan and policies for comprehensive community recovery and resiliency - including housing, transportation, community health, economic development, wildfire prevention, recreation, environmental protection, etc.
 - The process must integrate engagement with the “off-grid” community, elderly, disabled, and other often underrepresented community members to find out what solutions would work for them and create a genuinely equitable plan.

- Incorporate all elements of resilience into the plan -- social and economic systems, not just infrastructure. Prioritize community sustainability.
- Incorporate infrastructure plans in development through Oregon Solutions and other similar processes.
- Use the visioning process as an opportunity to teach people about the role and value of planning in disaster recovery and how to self-advocate as a community.
- Update the County's land-use planning framework to reflect the pre-and post-fire needs of the entire community (including "off-grid" individuals) so that a rebuilt community serves all who want to live there.
 - The county should seek to formalize a community-led plan and coordinate implementation (see Land Use recommendations below).
 - Refer to research and case studies in [OAPA's Planning Best Practices for Wildfire Recovery & Rebuilding](#).

Recommendations for Code + Land Use Planning Updates

Pursue environmentally sensitive and legal pathways for survivors to re-establish residency in the area, especially those outlined in the "Left Behind" section above.

- The County could consider updating the Rural Comprehensive Plan and adopting an ordinance that will allow Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) in unincorporated County rural residential zones.
- The County could consider acknowledging housing development solutions that work for different landowners.
 - i.e., Private landowners may want to allow non-compliant ADUs, RVs, or more informal living arrangements on their land. While it may not be within the County's ability to permit these types of uses (this would require state or federal policy change), the County could take action to track and document the existence of these informal housing situations, and where possible offer opportunities to bring them into compliance with legal dwelling status.
- The County should incentivize the conversion of existing housing to be ADA accessible and building/fire code compliant due to the severe shortage of available units. This may include assistance with applying for state funds to upgrade units or providing financial assistance to residents who qualify.

Recommendations for diverse and innovative housing solutions

Seek to support and fund opportunities that center survivors' diverse housing needs and increase housing choices for the long term.

- Identify the housing needs of those “off-grid” individuals who lived in the area before the fire, with considerations of lower scale such as tiny home villages or similar housing solutions.
 - Work with mental health professionals to collaborate on a prototype for housing support for people with PTSD or similar conditions for whom high-density living may be counterproductive to their recovery.
- Engage local businesses in discussing workforce housing needs and options; explore best practices and funding with housing and economic development partners.

Recommendations for increased disaster preparedness

Review current systems and add to operational plans that apply lessons from the Holiday Farm Fire response and recovery.

- Develop a structure for establishing resilience centers (community centers or community hubs designed to offer emergency preparedness and emergency response services) within the community.
- Procure response organizations pre-disaster through establishing on-call services list(s) that include critical qualifications such as trauma-informed care
- Develop and support infrastructure for ongoing preparedness and response efforts, such as a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) specific to the McKenzie River Valley.
 - Other resources: Silver Jackets, Fire-Adapted Communities Network
- Other public and private sector preparedness resources are available in OAPA's Planning Best Practices guide.
- Establish a trauma-informed training and grief counseling protocol for local disaster responders and those with ongoing contact with survivors.

Detailed VisionLink Data Analysis

As best practice for trauma-informed planning, the CAPP team sought to maximize the use of information already shared by survivors in the recovery process. The Oregon Department of Human Services and Lane County provided anonymized and aggregated data from the VisionLink database used by social service providers.

Although data from VisionLink Database is incomplete (many data fields are blank and it is assumed that many survivors simply weren't captured in the data), there is still a significant amount of data entered by case managers that documents survivors and their economic, social, and other needs and helps with future planning. Several variables in the data set did not have any entries mainly because the survivors (respondents in interviews with caseworkers) did not provide more information, or the Disaster Case Managers (DCMs) were entered as "true" or "false." The "true" indicates that survivors agree with that condition and "false" means that survivors were not facing the conditions described. Most data are presented in absolute numbers while yielding valuable insights into present conditions for those who often "don't get a seat at the table."

Demographic Data

Figure 1 shows the demographic characteristics and the impacts of the Holiday Farm fire disaster, where households suffered a loss of income and employment (details available in Figures 6 and Figure 7 of this section).

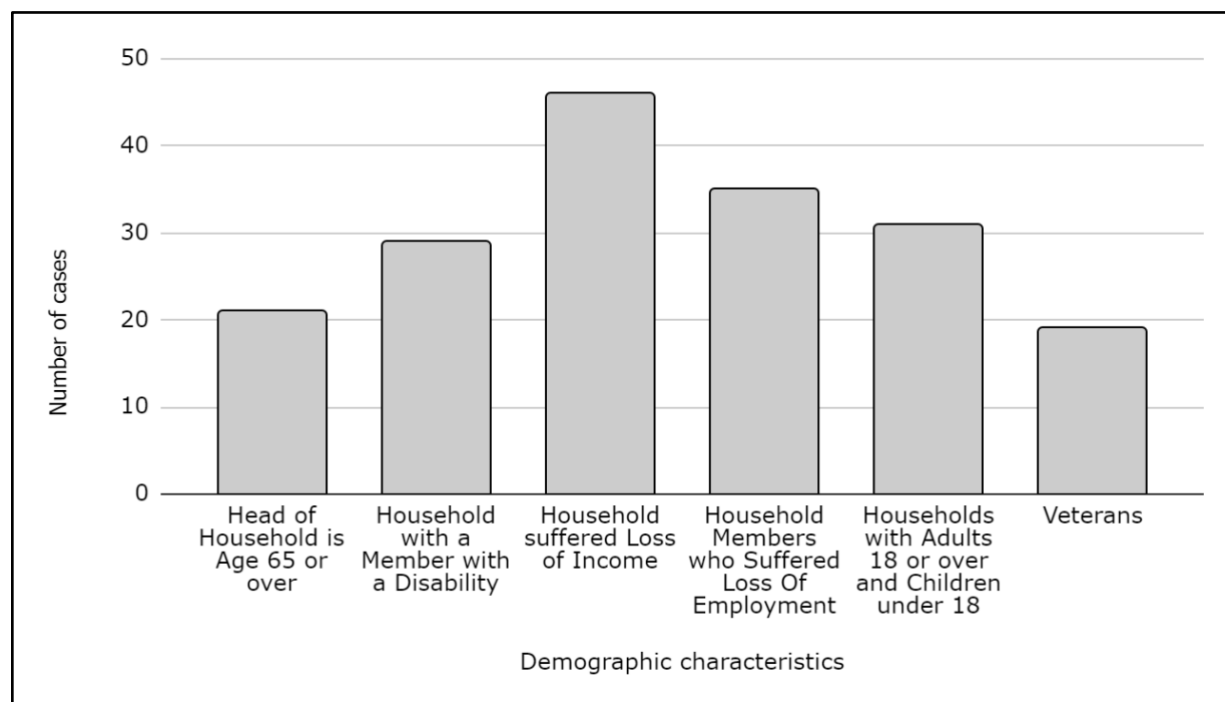


Figure 1. Demographic characteristics of open cases

Housing Status

Residents of the McKenzie River Valley rented or had other living arrangements before the fire disaster, such as living with family/friends. A few were transient.

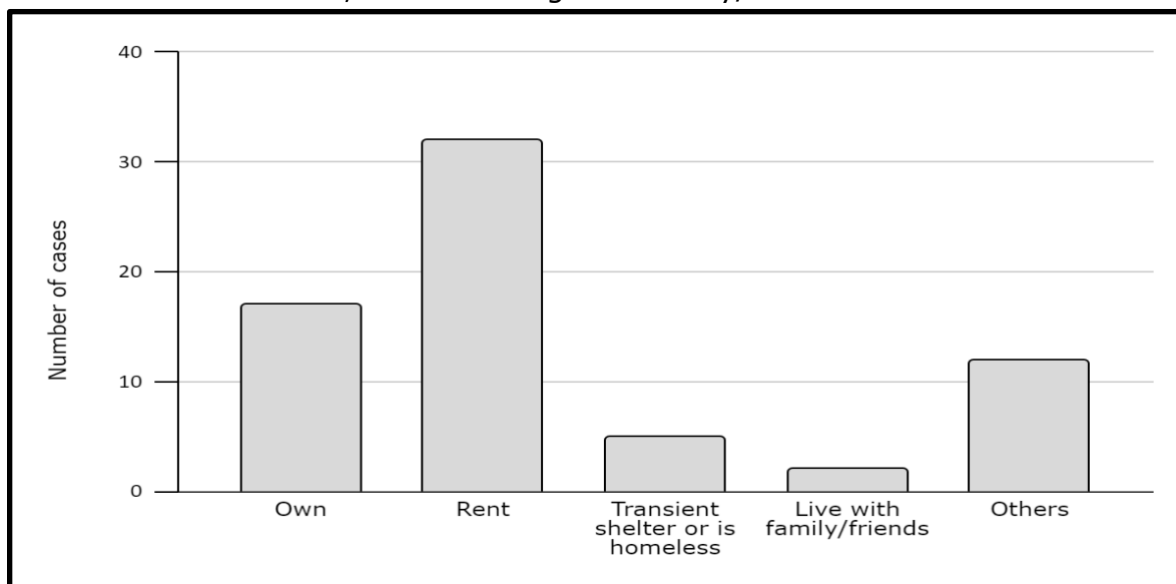


Figure 2. Pre-disaster residence

Many survivors of the Holiday Farm Fire still live in hotels/motels, while a few others rent, live in mobile homes, or have other living arrangements.

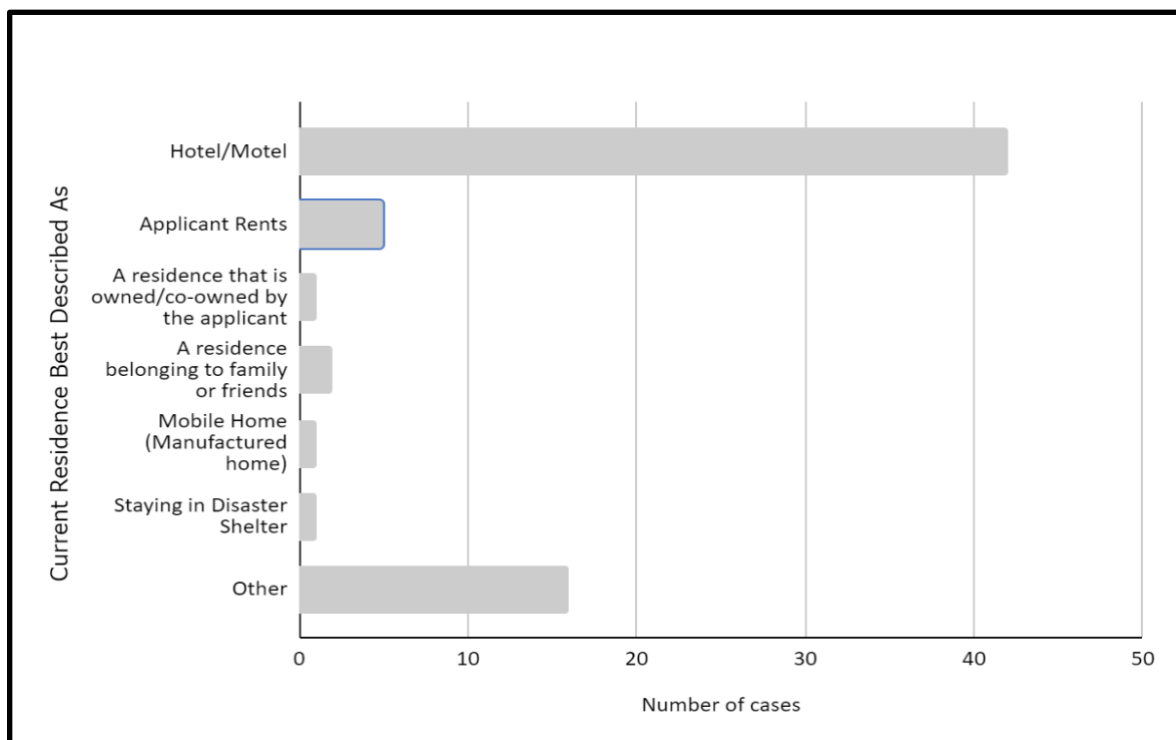


Figure 3. Current residence status (self-identification)

Many McKenzie River Valley wildfire survivors self-reported their homes as destroyed.

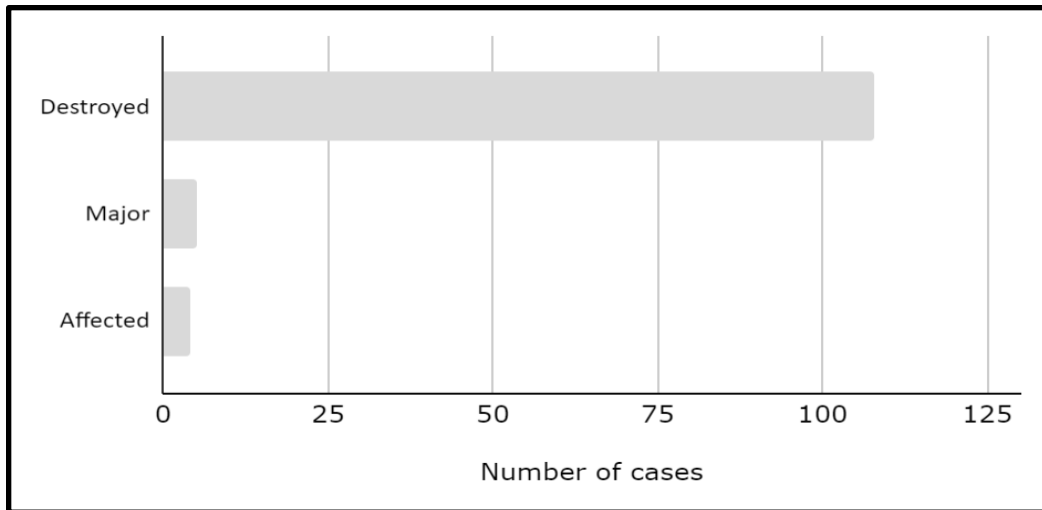


Figure 4. Level of damage to the home

Many who have lost their homes and are in temporary dwellings or seeking permanent relocation (see figure 8) of their residence self-reported as being underinsured or having no insurance.

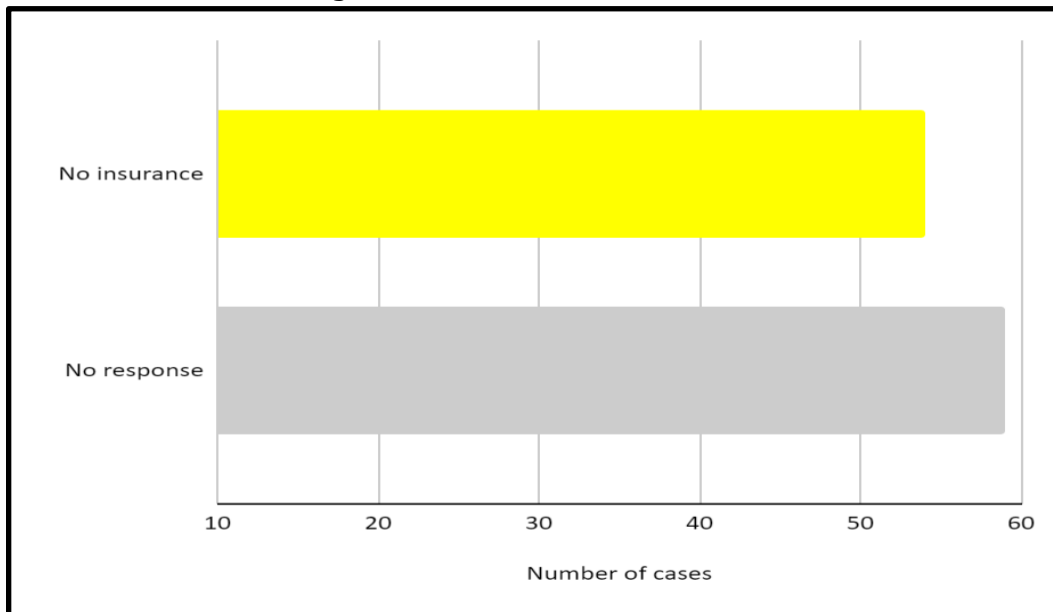


Figure 5. Household suffered primary damage and is underinsured or uninsured

Economic Status

Those who lost their employment have experienced a loss of income.

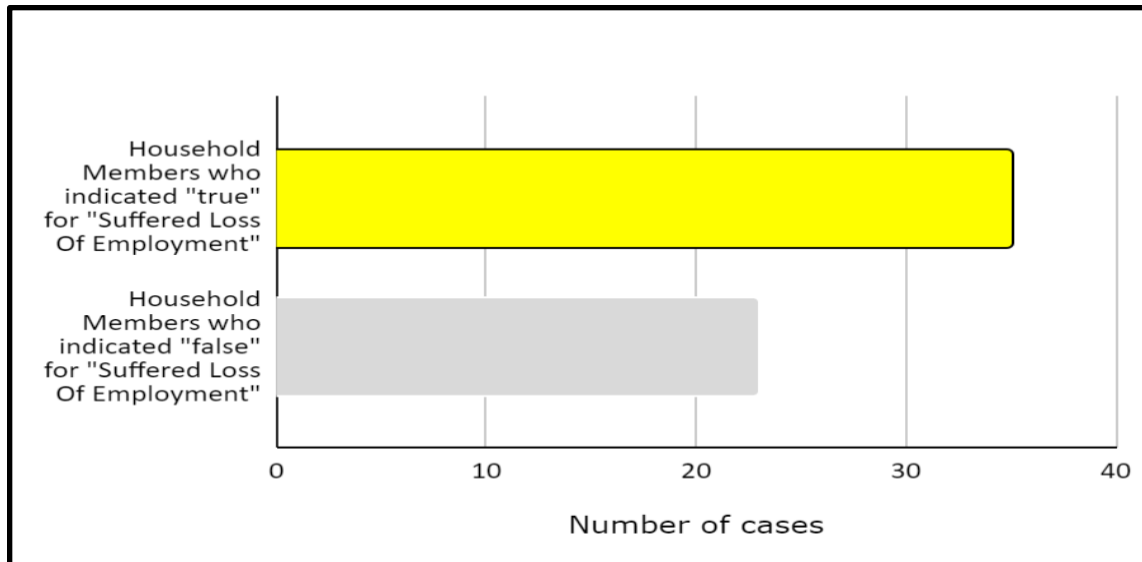


Figure 6. Employment status

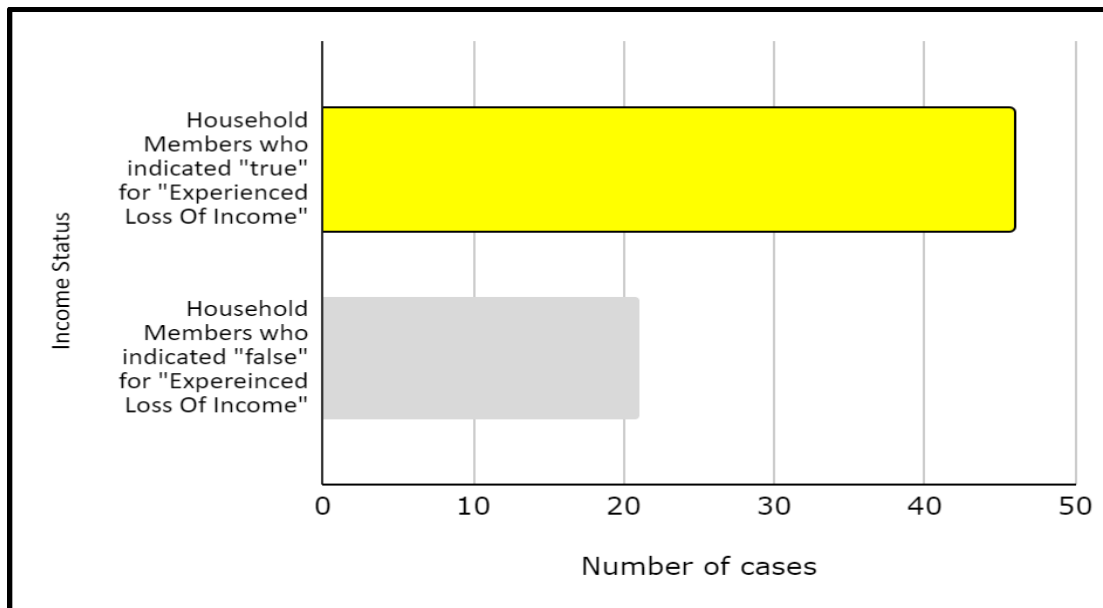


Figure 7. Loss of income

As expressed in interviews with social workers, the most significant recovery need was related to housing, with most families wanting to relocate permanently and a few wishing to reconstruct. Other requirements were finding employment, temporary housing, or medically related needs. Some others wanted to have benefits restored or other services.

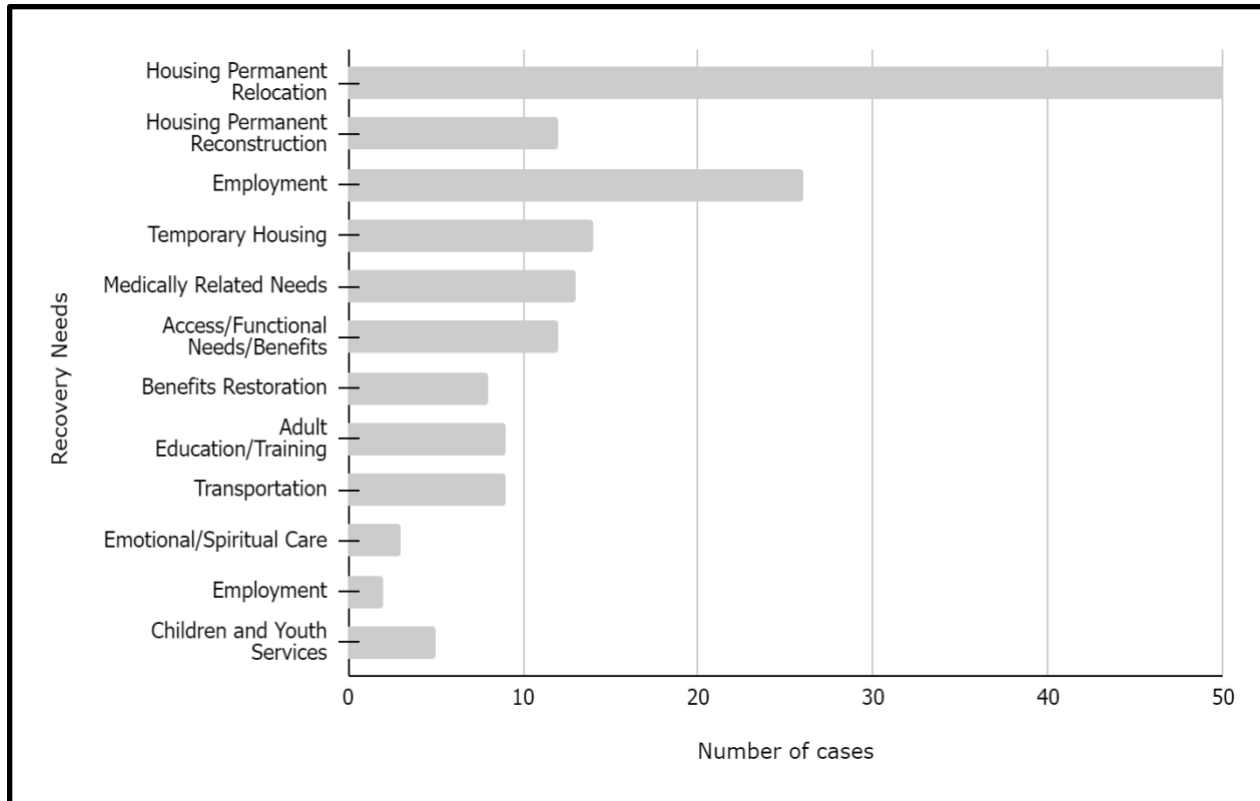


Figure 8. Holiday Farm Fire disaster recovery needs (Lane County)