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Wildfire Evacuees Maintain Communications Lifeline

The massive wildfires in Bastrop County and the surrounding area, called the most destructive in Texas history, have displaced thousands of area residents and left hundreds without homes. All are desperate for information and communication with loved ones, friends, and family.



Smithville Community Center serves as Red Cross Evacuation Center during Bastrop Complex fire.

However, the communications infrastructure was significantly impacted by the raging fire. Phone service was out in many areas and cellular service was spotty.

In Smithville, the city opened its recreation center as an evacuee shelter. Along with food, drinks, cots, and support, the evacuees also had access to computers with high-speed Internet, giving them a way to stay in touch and get vital news and updates.

These computers and a printer were installed as a public computer center through the Texas Connects Coalition (TxC2) a few weeks prior. TxC2 is a collaborative project between Houston-based Technology For All (TFA), Bastrop-headquartered Metropolitan Austin Interactive Network (MAIN), and Austin Free-Net. The coalition works with local community organizations to provide computer access, technical support, digital literacy, workforce development, and other services for underserved and vulnerable populations.

Outside the windows of the computer room, a towering plume of brownish-black smoke filled the sky as evacuees watched videos of fires, checked maps, and searched for any information about their home or property. Every computer was in use as the center filled with evacuees.

“The phones, landlines were out, cell service dropping calls left and right, and if it were not for the presence of the additional computers made available by the Texas Connects Coalition, we would have been in a quagmire in the ability to communicate. Simple apps like Facebook were one of our biggest tools to calm the citizens, and to give hourly updates to our affected friends,” said Smithville Mayor Mark A. Bunte.

One elderly man in a wheelchair used a social media site to notify family of his safety. Next to him, a volunteer helped two women confirm if their homes were destroyed. A woman who had lost her home and pets as she escaped fought back tears watching news footage online of the fire's notorious speed. "I just couldn't get my pets out," she said, her voice breaking.



Smithville resident checks fires online on September 6, 2011

In this rural area, evacuations also mean huge efforts to move cattle, horses, and other farm animals from the danger zone to safety. A rancher with property in the fire's path searched online for people offering trailers to help evacuate livestock.

A six-year-old boy watched cartoons on the web as his father found him a shirt that didn't smell like smoke. Later, the boy gave his computer to a man whose home and farm buildings burned to the ground. He printed photos and forms for insurance purposes. "Not much to show them," he said with a pained chuckle.

An employee from the TFA office in Houston rushed more computers to the center. As TXC2 workers installed the extra computers, a teenage girl staying in the shelter offered help to take her mind off the tragedy. "I just need something to do," she said. "I want to help somehow."

Marcia Jenkins, president of Smithville Community Network (SCN), which helped arrange installation of the recreation center's new computers two weeks earlier, said she is so thankful they were available. "The computers were immediately in heavy use. For those displaced from their homes and in many cases have suffered severe losses, we hope that access to information can provide some peace of mind." Jenkins added, "In the upcoming days and weeks, the computer lab will be there not only for those who need to research the many details and options available to put their lives back together, but for anyone in the community that would like to use them. My heart goes out to everyone who has suffered losses in the wildfires."

TXC2 workers have been impacted by the fires as well. One TXC2 employee lost his home, running from the fire with his dogs and a backpack. Despite his loss, he continues to do his job. Another employee, an evacuee himself, answered questions about the computers and helped others search for updates. He later relayed information from a meeting that county and local officials held with evacuees to a local librarian for a website.

"These tragic events have changed the face of this community forever," he said. "But one thing will remain: our sense of community and desire to assist our friends and neighbors. I'm just glad we were able to help however we could," he added. "These computers proved very useful, helping people get much needed information and letting others know that they were safe."

The center's computers, which replaced eleven-year-old machines, were made available through a federal grant from the U. S. Department of Commerce under the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) to Technology For All for the TXC2 project.



Displaced residents share information, computers in the Smithville Recreation Center

"We are grateful for the opportunity to assist the evacuees from the fires in Central Texas. The ability to respond quickly to community needs is one of the reasons we created the Texas Connects Coalition project with our partners Austin Free-Net and the Metropolitan Austin Interactive Network," said Will Reed, TFA's president and chief executive officer.

A TXC2 office opened in Smithville days before the fires to help provide computers and training in rural areas in central Texas and the San Antonio region. On the east side of the fire, TXC2 is replacing 20 of Bastrop Public Library's 30 computers. The library also saw a surge in visitors and usage following the blazes. TXC2 will provide additional computers and printers to another evacuation shelter in the next few days.

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Note: the evacuees mentioned in this article did not wish to give their names.

Photos attached: The Smithville Recreation Center serves as a Red Cross Evacuation Center during the Bastrop Complex fire; An evacuee from the Bastrop County wildfires checks the Internet for latest information at the Smithville Texas Evacuation Center; Smithville residents use the Smithville Recreation Center computer lab (Courtesy of the Texas Connects Coalition).

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Will Reed, TFA CEO and Managing Director of the project, Will.Reed@techforall.org 713.454.6411

Libbey Scheible, TXC2 Director of Operations and Programs for Rural Texas & San Antonio
Libbey.Scheible@techforall.org 512.415.5241 (cell)

Tom Swinnea, TXC2 Program Specialist, tom.swinnea@techforall.org 214.697.3425 (cell)

TXC2 Rural Texas and San Antonio office, 111 Main Street, Smithville, Texas 78957 www.txc2.org

Technology For All (TFA) is a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization whose mission is to empower under-resourced communities through the tools of technology. Since 1997, TFA has also provided supportive services with public computer centers and other community technology organizations in 56 U.S. cities. By working together with local community-based organizations, corporations, foundations, technology providers and public entities, TFA creates educational, economic and personal opportunities for low-income persons and the communities in which they live. TFA's offices are located at 2220 Broadway, Houston, Texas 77012. For more information, visit www.techforall.org; call 713-454-6400.

Texas Connects Coalition (TXC2) is a collaborative project between Technology For All, Metropolitan Austin Interactive Network, and Austin Free-Net. TFA is the recipient and manager of a grant for the project from the U.S. Department of Commerce Broadband Technology Opportunities Program. By working together, TXC2 provides computer and Internet access, training and other resources for Texans with limited access to digital opportunities in the Austin, Houston, San Antonio, central Texas and Brazos Valley regions. For more information, visit www.txc2.org.