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## Red Cross: Many evacuees staying with friends, hotels

- Story Highlights
- **NEW:** Oncoming flames nearly force evacuation of Spring Valley shelter
- Fires have forced an estimated 950,000 people to abandon their homes
- Red Cross: Numbers at shelters represent small fraction of evacuees
- Hotel manager: "I had to turn away entire families at a time"

**SAN DIEGO, California (CNN)** -- The wildfires in California have forced an exodus of estimated 950,000 people from their homes. But where have they all gone?

The American Red Cross reported Wednesday that only a small fraction of the nearly 1 million evacuees spent the past few nights at dozens of designated shelters stretching from San Diego County to Los Angeles County.

"We believe many people are staying with family and friends or going to hotels," said Red Cross spokeswoman Jeanne Ellinport in Washington. "We understand that hotel rooms are hard to find."

Fifteen hundred homes have been destroyed in the fires, according to authorities.

Kirk Shaw, office manager at the city's Days Inn Harbor View said the facility has been flooded with evacuees, many of them coming from Ramona "saying that their houses were actually on fire."

The hotel has turned away dozens of guests in the past three days, Shaw said, during a time when business is traditionally slow. "People come in -- three four cars at a time -- saying they'd been driving around for like three hours and they needed a couple of rooms for their entire families, I didn't even have one for them, so I had to turn away entire families at a time."

[Watch fire victims on how they lost their home in Ramona »](#)

Officials have evacuated nearly 350,000 homes in San Diego County alone, where the worst of the fires are blazing. Based on numbers from the 2000 census, as many as 950,000 people may have been affected.

Some 6,000 conventioners with the American Society of Human Genetics opted to share hotel rooms. Others who were feeling more generous scrapped their convention to volunteer at the Qualcomm Center, said San Diego Convention and Visitors Bureau spokesman Steven Johnson.

"They said, 'We're medical people, we might be able to help,'" Johnson said. "We've found that visitors in San Diego want to help. There hasn't been a lot of complaining."

ASHG has established an emergency relief fund for its members to provide additional financial support to help with relief efforts, according to a statement issued by Mayor Jerry Sanders. Information about the fund can be found at [www.ashg.org](http://www.ashg.org).

Evacuees also include more than 4,000 military personnel from bases in the area. The fires have done much more than disrupted lives. Many residents, such as Christie Williams of Ramona, have lost cherished homes.

Flames claimed her family's Shangrila Ranch, which she's vowing to rebuild. "It's my home," said Williams, whose children are ages 4, 2 and 1. "My kids took their first steps there. I can't just leave it," she said, as tears filled her eyes. "I can't just walk away." [See photos of devastated homes »](#)

Williams and her family are making the best of their tragedy at the Qualcomm Stadium -- home to the NFL's San Diego

Chargers -- which at one time housed 11,000 evacuees, but by Wednesday morning held 7,500, according to a city emergency official.

"My 4-year-old saw the fire ... we tried to explain that these things can be replaced ... and she's like, 'we're strong people.' And so we're going to make it," Williams said.

The Red Cross reports setting up 24 shelters in San Diego, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange and Ventura counties, with the majority, 12, in San Diego County.  [See map of state's major fires >](#)

David Paulison, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, told CNN on Wednesday that 20,000 people were using shelters to escape the fires. "We're working with the Red Cross to make sure we have enough supplies here, food, water, any type of needs they have in these shelters.  [Watch Paulison on how FEMA has changed since Hurricane Katrina >](#)

The Red Cross' Ellinport said about 5,500 people stayed in the shelters overnight. But, she added, that total may not reflect the number of people who used the shelters during the day and who found other accommodations later.

On Tuesday, the fast-moving Harris Fire nearly forced 500 evacuees to flee an evacuation center at Steele Creek High School near Spring Valley.

Red Cross officials were concerned about trying to evacuate so many people from oncoming flames, so firefighters chose to increase their efforts around the school, successfully turning back the fire.

The Red Cross has declared the wildfires a Level 5 -- its highest response rating for natural disasters.

Red Cross response to the fires has been going very smoothly, she said.

"The cooperation between partners has been great, and the moving of equipment and supplies, everything has been good," she said.

The best thing to do for people wanting to help is to send money, Ellinport said, so that the agency can direct the funds as best needed.

CNN's Alanne Orjoux and Kara Finnstrom contributed to this report.

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