Doctors, Nurses Press Ahead as Wildfires Strain Los Angeles' Health Care

Some providers have lost homes or had to evacuate their neighborhoods, but they're still doing their jobs.

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The rapidly spreading wildfires that have transformed much of Los Angeles County into a raging hellscape are not only upending the lives of tens of thousands of residents and business owners, but also stressing the region's hospitals, health clinics, first responders, and nursing homes.

At least one medical clinic burned down. Senior patients were evacuated by ambulance from nursing facilities as embers swirled around them and their providers. Medical offices have closed, and routine appointments have been canceled. Some providers have lost homes or had to evacuate their neighborhoods, keeping them from work in many cases and making it a challenge for some health care centers to maintain sufficient staffing.

Amid the maelstrom, doctors, nurses, and other caregivers did their jobs.

On Tuesday night, Ravi Salgia, an oncologist at City of Hope National Medical Center in Duarte, saw the house above his Eaton Canyon home go up in flames. As debris and sparks fell, he, his wife, and their older daughter estimated they had no more than seven minutes to get out. In the middle of the night, Salgia got a call that the hospital had become an emergency command center and was at risk of evacuation, meaning he needed to help evaluate patients and make discharge preparations.

Salgia arrived at the hospital at 2:30 a.m. Wednesday. He was joined by colleagues, many of whom had also evacuated their homes.

"We all felt very strongly that we needed to take care of our patients — no matter what's happening to us physically and emotionally, what's happening to our houses — that we need to make sure that the people we serve were taken care of," Salgia said in an interview.

He doesn't know if his house is still standing.

In Pacific Palisades, St. John's Physician Partners, a primary care and pediatric clinic affiliated with Providence Health & Services, burned down, said Patricia Aidem, a spokesperson for the large Catholic hospital chain based in Renton, Washington.

Not far from the eastern edge of the Palisades Fire, Providence St. John's Health Center in Santa Monica, one of the group's major LA-area hospitals, was so close to evacuating that it called other hospitals in the area to find space for patients who would be displaced, Aidem said. USC Verdugo Hills Hospital, in Glendale, also faced potential evacuation, along with other hospitals in the region.

"All hospitals in close proximity to the fires remain on high alert and are prepared to evacuate if conditions worsen," the Hospital Association of Southern California said in a statement. "The fires are creating significant operational hurdles," the association added.

The association also said emergency services have been strained by high call volumes, while road closures have impeded the transport of patients, supplies, and health care workers. Some health facilities have been hit by power outages, the association said, while "many staff members are directly impacted by evacuations and fire-related disruptions, further complicating operations."

The California Department of Managed Health Care on Thursday ordered health plans to ensure enrollees affected by wildfires have access to all needed medical services, including prescription drug refills.

Aidem said some doctors and other health workers at Providence St. John's in Santa Monica and Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in the San Fernando Valley have lost homes or been evacuated, making them miss work and creating challenges to ensure adequate staffing.

Hospitals across the county said their emergency rooms had treated patients for burns, smoke inhalation, and eye irritation.

Over 700 people — and possibly far more — have been evacuated from nursing homes and other care facilities, according to the California Department of Public Health.

On Wednesday, West Valley Health Center, operated by Los Angeles County's Department of Health Services, closed due to a power outage, the department said. And UCLA Health said the closure of some of its clinics in Pasadena and on L.A.'s Westside was due partly to "utility shutoffs."

Children's Hospital Los Angeles said two of its specialty care clinics, in Encino and Santa Monica, were closed Thursday "due to the impacts from the wind storm, power outages and wild fires."

Providence also has shut several clinics this week.

The two biggest blazes, the Palisades Fire in the parched coastal hills of western L.A. County and the Eaton Fire on the Eastside, have together torched more than 50 square miles, burned

thousands of structures, reduced beloved cultural landmarks to ashes, killed at least 10 people, and severely injured many more.

The monster winds that fueled the explosion of the fires on Tuesday and Wednesday have begun to quiet down, though significant gusts are still expected to complicate the task of firefighters for the next several days.

Routine medical care will likely be disrupted for thousands in the days ahead.

Kaiser Permanente, the giant HMO and medical provider, said it closed multiple medical sites Thursday due to the fires, including a pharmacy and laboratory and an eye clinic.

Huntington Hospital in Pasadena, close to the Eaton Fire, said some of its outpatient offices were affected by evacuation notices and heavy smoke.

Dignity Health, another large health system, said some of its hospitals were operating on generator power due to high winds, and some, including Glendale Memorial Hospital, had canceled elective surgeries. Other hospitals, including USC Verdugo Hills and Providence St. John's, temporarily halted nonemergency surgeries due to the impact of the wildfires.

Christine Kirmsse, a registered nurse, evacuated her Santa Monica home on Wednesday night and is staying at a hotel an hour away. But she said she feels strongly that she needs to come into work.

"There's obviously so much help that's needed," Kirmsse said. "And it's important to me because I have the skills to be able to help. In times like this, this is when community is the most powerful."

KFF Health News' Chaseedaw Giles and Tarena Lofton contributed to this report.

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