

Climate Disaster Response and Community Care: Assessment & Connections Case Study

The UU Fellowship of Springer (UUPS) congregation is a medium sized congregation with approximately 90 active members. Like many, UUPS saw a decrease in activity throughout the pandemic; services were conducted virtually and in-person engagement was limited. The congregation is slowly coming back together with outdoor services and some in-person worship. The building is located on almost ten acres in a beautiful setting east of town with lovely shade trees, a covered pavilion, and an expansive lawn where the community gathers for outdoor worship. The building was recently remodeled to increase indoor space for activities primarily in the previously unfinished basement, which now includes a commercial kitchen, large meeting space, and several smaller rooms for religious education, childcare during services, and offices.

The minister of the congregation is interested in climate change, but is more focused on racial justice concerns. The congregation recognizes Earth Day with a nature-inspired worship service. Most members of the congregation are highly educated and aware of climate concerns and try to live more sustainably, but many express feeling overwhelmed with climate change. A few members of the congregation host vegetarian potlucks, share action alerts from state and national environmental organizations, and volunteer in the gardens. They achieved Green Sanctuary accreditation in 2008, but there hasn't been an organized climate effort for years.

Most of the congregation's community partnerships are held by its Racial Justice Team, which works mostly with immigration rights organizations. The team members amplify cases of local undocumented community members facing deportation, and advocating for their release. Sometimes members offer supplies, rides, or funds when a specific ask is made. The congregation's Economic Justice Team works alongside other faith communities on supply and food drives designed to benefit unhoused and/or lower-income community members.

Outside of its formal justice ministries, UUPS has a small but steady Children's Religious Education program, run by its half-time Director of Religious Education. About 10-15 children under 10 show up each Sunday for classes led by volunteer teachers, while 2-5 youth (12+) go to youth group after services. The young adult group that was growing in 2019 is now almost defunct, having had little leadership during the pandemic. UUPS has a Facebook page and private Facebook group for its members, which are run by the congregation's minister and quarter-time administrator, with support from a couple of volunteers.

Located in the northwest U.S. known for its natural beauty, Springer is a community of about 30,000. While the weather is historically moderate, extreme heat is an increasing concern. Many are not used to the extreme heat, don't have air conditioning, and many struggle when

temperatures soar well over 100 degrees. The recent heat wave resulted in hundreds of direct and indirect heat-related fatalities and illness across the region. There have been several power outages as power demand surges during hot and cold weather extremes.

Severe drought and extreme heat contribute to a more extreme wildfire season all over the region. The wildfires have displaced thousands of people, destroyed hundreds of homes, and many lives have been lost. Although Springer has not been in the path of a wildfire, dense wildfire smoke has produced hazardous air quality that affected millions of people throughout the area. Water shortages and record-low levels in reservoirs increasingly impact agriculture and exacerbate wildfire risks. Significant rainfall is causing flooding and mudslides in the same areas burned by wildfires in recent years. The fire/flooding combination caused dozens of mudslides which damaged roads, homes, vehicles, businesses, and infrastructure. High winds during rain and snowstorms caused extensive power outages during the cold-weather months.

Springer is a mostly-white, middle-class community. Summertime brings an influx of tourists who come to enjoy the natural beauty and the historic downtown shopping area. The agricultural industry increasingly relies on immigrants and migrant workers, most of whom live on the south side of town or nearby rural areas. Many of the immigrant community live in multi-family or multi-generational homes. Most of the homes on the south side were built in the 50's with poor insulation and inefficient windows and doors. With increasing electricity rates, many struggle to choose between paying for utilities, food, medicines, or fuel - all of which are more expensive with inflation. During Covid, unhoused community members set up tents in a wooded area on the outskirts of town. Housing insecurity is an increasing concern.

Across the community, neighborhoods frequently flood during the rainy season, and there is often stagnant, standing water in low-lying areas. The community is heavily car-dependent with a few bus routes that service downtown. There is a hospital on the north side of town, a bi-lingual clinic on the south side, and two adult care homes in the southeast. There is no grocery store on the south side of town, but there is a small bodega where community members set up an informal farmers market during the harvest season.

Although there is not a dedicated "climate" group in the community, there are several community organizations that work with diverse populations, including a Senior Center, Habitat for Humanity, El Centro, Catholic Charities, and Leadership Springer. The Methodist church in town hosts a Spanish-language preschool and weekly Small World gatherings where community members of all languages can come together and learn English and connect with one another. UUFS often coordinates with the Methodist, Lutheran, and United Church of Christ congregations on food drives to help stock the Springer food pantry and soup kitchen. On occasion, they host community-wide rummage sales to raise money for Community Living Opportunities, which provides services for adults with disabilities.

Climate Disaster Response and Community Care: Mobilizing for Action Case Study

Tensions are high due recent fires that threatened the community, especially the tent encampment and the lower income housing on the edge of town. A local birdwatching group has been petitioning the city to clean up the tents near the park where they take their weekly nature walks. The bakery across from the Methodist Church has been complaining about people congregating around their dumpsters and scaring off their patrons. They've started pouring bleach on the bread they throw away to deter scavenging. The encampment is now threatened with further displacement because an out-of-state developer wants to buy the land.

Thanks to generous funding from the local Community Foundation, the city has invested in parks across the community. The Chamber is concerned that the rising homeless population is making a mess of these beloved parks and scaring off the tourists; tourism is a major economic driver in the community. The business voices in the community are relieved at the prospect of a developer purchasing the property which will "take care of the problem."

The upcoming city council agenda includes discussion on both the county sustainability plan and emergency winter shelters. There is vocal opposition to the proposed locations for winter shelters. The sustainability advocates are concerned that the housing issues will - once again - allow the county to postpone long-term planning around sustainability and climate. The two factions - climate and housing advocates - are increasingly at odds, which stymies progress on either issue and tips the power towards the developers.

The bilingual clinic has been sounding the alarm that they are struggling to meet the increased needs from the community. The hospital reported an increase in heat stroke and heat-related illness in outdoor workers and an alarming number of children with asthma attacks; two children died. Due to the high number of migrant workers in the area, many patients don't have insurance and language barriers are a challenge. As a primarily volunteer-run organization, El Centro is doing their best, but their resources are stretched thin. High school children of immigrant workers are posting to SnapChat and TicToc about the issues in the area.

Electra, the four-county Investor Owned Utility provider is requesting a rate increase of 17% plus an increase in fixed charges. Electra received tax-payer funded bailouts through the CARES Act then shut off utilities to hundreds of households during the pandemic leaving people without hot water, refrigeration, air conditioning and medical devices. These shut offs pushed more people into housing insecurity and homelessness. The bailout money was more than enough to forgive the unpaid bills several times over, but the IOU instead paid out shareholder dividends and lobbied against shut-off moratoria. They reported record profits. A coalition of energy advocates in the nearby metro area is fighting the rate increase and arguing for greater investments in energy efficiency and weatherization for low- and moderate-income households. The coalition includes the largest UU congregation in the area and a multi-racial Congregationally Based Community Organizing group that focuses on economic justice, along with traditional energy advocates like the Sierra Club, and state and local environmental organizations, including Energy Justice Now and Advocates for Air Quality.