

## Salvation Army volunteer a ‘survivor and first responder’ in New Mexico wildfires

The Southfork and Salt fires converged June 17 on the small mountain resort town of Ruidoso, New Mexico. Before the fires could be contained, extreme flash flooding over the burn scars flowed into town, causing more destruction in an already-devastated area.

Steve Gomez, a 15-year Salvation Army bellringer and volunteer chair of The Salvation Army Ruidoso Service Extension Unit, sprang into action.



“I am humbled to be both a survivor and first responder in Ruidoso. I know the heartbreak my friends and neighbors are feeling over the loss of homes, jobs and livelihoods,” Gomez said. “I am grateful to be a member of The Salvation Army’s disaster response efforts to restore and rebuild lives.”

The Ruidoso Service Extension Unit is part of The Salvation Army’s network of [service extension units](#) — typically [volunteer-run Salvation Army units](#) that provide social services in small communities throughout the Western U.S.

These local volunteers represent The Salvation Army and provide emergency assistance to those in need, including emergency food, rent and utilities assistance. In 2023, 31 service extension units in the Southwest Division—made up of over 560 volunteers—served nearly 3,800 people.



Steve Gomez, a 15-year Salvation Army bellringer and volunteer chair of The Salvation Army Ruidoso Service Extension Unit, sprang into action in response to the Southfork and Salt fires. Courtesy Southwest Division.

When called upon during a catastrophic incident, this network of local volunteers ramps up to provide emergency assistance for its own community and neighbors.

“Service Extension is such a unique part of The Salvation Army matrix of services. These volunteers take on the special role of stewardship in providing resources right in their own community and provide care and support for their neighbors,” said [Western Territorial Emergency/Disaster Services Director John Berglund](#). “During times of disaster, it’s even more significant, as these volunteers are also experiencing the devastating impact of fires, floods, hurricanes and tornadoes in their own lives.”

Gomez has been in the center of The Salvation Army Southwest Division’s response to the federally declared disaster. He runs the Ruidoso Service Extension Unit out of his business, the Cornerstone Bakery & Café in mid-town Ruidoso.

He has been serving survivors and first responders out of the Cornerstone Bakery & Café, which has also faced setbacks, as employees were impacted by the fires and floods.

He’s also hand-delivered gas cards as far away as Santa Fe to survivors who had just moments to evacuate.

“Our community fled in the middle of the night and found themselves scattered across New Mexico with very little,” he said. “These gas cards ensured their safe return to Ruidoso, but many found they no longer had a home.”

The Salvation Army Emergency/Disaster Services (EDS) was activated by the State of New Mexico for donations management in Lincoln and Otero counties during the wildfire response.

From June 18 through July 15, The Salvation Army served nearly 2,500 people with some 13,000 meals; over 140,000 snacks; around 12,000 cases of water; and gift cards, household goods, lodging and more. The value of the goods and services is estimated to be more than \$930,000. In addition, The Salvation Army provided [emotional and spiritual support](#).

“We are grateful for Steve’s deep ties to the community, which has allowed The Salvation Army to have a greater impact on families in need. Steve exemplifies what it means to have a servant’s heart, and we are fortunate to have him on our team,” said Major Charles Fowler, Southwest Divisional Commander. “Long after the last responders leave town, The Salvation Army Ruidoso Service Extension Unit will be here to provide comfort and care to the community.”

*With reporting by Scott Johnson and Nicole Kanne*

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