

Wildfire Insight Series:

## The Human Price of Climate Change

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As wildfires ravaged Jasper, many Canadians watched in horror, their hearts heavy with empathy for the residents grappling with the devastating loss of their homes and businesses. The destruction is not just physical; it has obliterated those reminders of cherished memories — favorite books, travel souvenirs, photo albums — all the items that turn a house into a home.

For many, the ordeal of evacuation remains a distant but unsettling possibility. While I have never received an evacuation notice or faced the panic of a middle-of-the-night knock advising immediate departure due to flooding or approaching wildfires, countless others living in Northwestern Ontario have. Each year, communities like Thunder Bay host evacuees from Ontario's northern First Nations, who flee from the escalating impacts of climate change, including severe flooding and wildfires.

Many years ago, I volunteered to assist evacuees arriving in Thunder Bay during crises caused by fires and floods in remote First Nations communities. This experience proved both challenging and deeply rewarding. The convergence of people from diverse backgrounds, all grappling with loss and uncertainty, creates an emotionally charged environment. The immediate priority is always the safety and well-being of the evacuees, necessitating swift, coordinated action from local authorities, volunteers, and aid organizations.

One of my first experiences was during the flooding of Pic Mobert First Nation in the 1980s. The resilience and solidarity displayed by Pic Mobert were striking. Despite the stress and fear, a palpable sense of camaraderie emerged among evacuees and volunteers. Marathon, a close-knit community, became a cornerstone of the relief efforts. Local businesses, churches, and community centers transformed into makeshift shelters and supply hubs, offering not just essentials but a semblance of normalcy and comfort.

However, the experience is not without its hurdles. Limited resources and infrastructure in small cities can strain under the sudden influx of evacuees. Managing logistics—from ensuring adequate food and medical supplies to providing psychological support—

demands meticulous planning and adaptability. Volunteers often find themselves juggling multiple roles, from caregivers to logistical coordinators, which can be both physically and emotionally taxing.

Despite these challenges, the work is immensely fulfilling. We organized activities for elementary school students, including a memorable trip to the library in Marathon. I will never forget the look of wonder on one boy's face as he gazed at the shelves of books and exclaimed, "WOW." The sight of children playing safely despite the chaos, and the small victories in overcoming daily obstacles all serve as powerful reminders of the impact of community and human kindness.

Working with evacuees highlights the profound human capacity for compassion and resilience and underscores the vital importance of preparedness and solidarity in the face of natural disasters. However, we must do more to support those affected by fires and floods. The reality is that any one of us could find ourselves in their shoes, and it is our collective responsibility to be prepared and supportive but also tackle the real impacts of climate change as individuals, communities and citizens. We never know when it will be our turn to face that midnight knock on the door.