



WILDFIRE RISK TO COMMUNITIES

Austin, Texas

Dispelling the Myths

While working on the first Community Wildfire Protection Plan in Texas, Justice Jones learned some valuable lessons about community engagement. At the time, Justice was serving as the State Wildland-Urban Interface and Prevention Coordinator for the Texas Forest Service. The community within Walker County that the Fire Chief was most worried about was a historic, lower-income, and predominantly Black community northwest of downtown Huntsville, Texas.

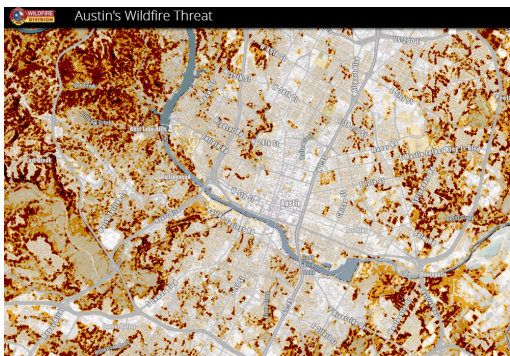
As Justice and the Fire Chief walked through the community, they encountered a resident who bluntly assessed their outreach efforts: “Nobody here is going to talk to you.” When the gentleman was asked who the community would talk with, he explained that he was the local Pastor and he believed the community would talk with him. Deeper conversations explored the historic marginalization of the community and how important it was to the community that, for the first time, public safety personnel were showing up with them and prioritizing their risk. The community was very receptive. For Justice, it further dispelled the myth that people with fewer economic resources aren’t taking wildfire mitigation action.

Maybe people aren’t asking “How can we help you?”

Too often, we ask “Can we help you the same way we’re helping other people?”

~Justice Jones, Austin Fire Department Wildfire Mitigation Officer

Evaluating Risk More Equitably



Above: A section of Austin's wildfire risk map.

After Justice moved to the Austin Fire Department and began his work as the Wildfire Mitigation Officer, he came across an article highlighting existing racial divides in Austin. Historically, the area west of I-35 has been mostly white. While smaller in population than the area east of I-35, the western side of Austin has traditionally been over-represented in city government and services. The eastern side, home to a large and multicultural population, has been historically under-represented. As Justice began his wildfire mitigation work with the Wildfire Division, he discovered that the footprint of fire mitigation in Austin was concentrated along the western edge of the city. While this area has the most wildfire-receptive topography, it also has the structures with the highest property values and most ignition-resistant homes. The mitigation footprint did not extend along the eastern side of Austin. Consistent with their values as a Department, the Wildfire Division began examining options to extend wildfire risk reduction actions to all those who live in the city.

The Wildfire Division conducted a comprehensive risk analysis in 2014 and updated it in 2016. One of the keys to this risk assessment was looking beyond fire intensity to model susceptibility. By incorporating rate of spread and age of structures in addition to fire intensity, the Division was able to develop a model that didn’t just focus on the topographical features west of I-35. The model provided more accurate risk assessment in the grass fuel types more prevalent east of I-35 and enabled a more equitable prioritization of risk mitigation work.

“This work provided a way to tell the story of risk in a way that was more inclusive.” ~Justice Jones, Austin Fire Department Wildfire Mitigation Officer

Addressing Compounded Vulnerabilities

In 2018, the Division asked [Headwaters Economics](#) to take a closer look at the city's wildfire-vulnerable populations. The ensuing [report](#) goes into more depth about the specific ways in which some populations are less equipped than others to protect themselves from, react to, or bounce back from a wildfire. The report takes a broad view of vulnerability and includes those populations who have lower incomes, compromised physical health, limits to mobility, and who are linguistically isolated in addition to factors such as race and ethnicity. A key conclusion was that city mitigation resources would be wisely invested in east-side neighborhoods where "compounded vulnerabilities make mitigation, risk-reduction and pre-disaster preparation difficult."

Austin's Wildfire Division also began exploring how communities across Austin wanted to engage. They met with organizations like [Go Austin/Vamos! Austin](#) (GAVA) to ask how the Department could best reach community members. Early efforts focused on translation; Austin worked with IAFC to develop the first translated [Ready, Set, Go!](#) guide and later translated their wildfire preparedness guide into seven languages. Further conversations highlighted the importance of empowering partner organizations to help. The Wildfire Division provided GAVA materials and home ignition zone training and then worked together to outline a plan to move forward. Current efforts have focused on finding ways to get information about wildfire to members of the community from trusted sources. The Wildfire Division worked with The Nature Conservancy and International Association of Fire Chiefs to develop a Fire Adapted Families guide.

In early 2019, the Division decided its upcoming Community Wildfire Preparedness Symposium would be a good opportunity to engage residents and City staff in a conversation about how to best serve the needs of everyone living in Austin. Subject matter experts from Austin and across the nation convened in an area of the City closer to the vulnerable populations they wanted to reach.

Moving forward, the Wildfire Division is working to build and sustain partnerships following the COVID-19 pandemic. They continue to place equity at the forefront of wildfire risk mitigation, recognizing both that they have a long way to go and that taking action is an important start.



Above: Participants at Austin's 2019 Community Wildfire Preparedness Symposium

Key Takeaways from Austin

- Have the data to inform your efforts and to support your decisions. Examine your data and ask if it is inclusive and equitable.
- Think about wildfire risk not just from the perspective of the built environment. Explore community values and consider people's resiliency and ability to recover.
- Don't go into this work alone. You or your organization may not be the right point of contact for a community. The uniform you wear can be a barrier to getting work done. Ask questions, make connections, and get to know the community.
- Empower partners. Invest in developing your partners' capacity for wildfire work. This may be through training, the provision of translated materials, or frequent opportunities to connect.
- Try to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead of focusing on the ways you are used to helping people, focus on the way they want to partner.

This document was created by the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network on behalf of the Wildfire Risk to Communities website. FAC Net is a community of wildfire practitioners across the nation that is supported by the United States Forest Service, Departments of the Interior, The Nature Conservancy and the Watershed Research and Training Center. Visit fireadaptednetwork.org to subscribe to our weekly blog and get stories of community wildfire resilience straight to your inbox.