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SEIU 721 Frontline Workers Handle Massive Emergency Response as Their Own Homes Are Threatened by Thomas Fire

*Fifth Largest Wildfire in California History Impacts SEIU Members Working at
Over 20 Sites throughout Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties*

VENTURA, CA – Scores of SEIU 721 members living and working in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties continue to endure the impact, at work and at home, of the Thomas Fire – the fifth largest wildfire in the history of the State of California, which has raged for a week and has scorched over 234,000 acres with just 20% containment to-date. Many SEIU 721 members work on the emergency response front lines at county healthcare and public works sites while others are employed in Human Service Agency positions that rely on their hard work to keep social service departments functioning properly – all while their own homes are imperiled by wildfires.

“As the Thomas Fire burns, residents and the business community can rely on our members to keep Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties functioning,” said Bob Schoonover, SEIU 721 President. “Whether they’re respiratory therapists at the Ventura County Medical Center or social workers at Camino del Remedio in Santa Barbara, we can count on SEIU 721 members to get the job done – even when their own lives are being personally affected by a major catastrophe like the Thomas Fire. I’m especially proud of our members at the Ventura County Department of Public Works, who serve as First Responders when they clear hazardous roadways in rural areas that Fire Department personnel use to do their jobs. They really are in the thick of it. And they should all know that SEIU 721 is here to support our members – especially during a crisis.”

SEIU 721 has worked closely with Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties to ensure that accommodations are in place for workers affected by the Thomas Fire. In the Ventura County, the Board of Supervisors voted to authorize a maximum of 24 hours of leave with pay for employees impacted by the fires and up to 80 hours for those who lost their homes or have homes that were significantly damaged. Ventura County also expanded the number of sources who can contribute to the County of Ventura Employee Emergency Assistance Program. In Santa Barbara County, the Board of Supervisors voted to approve a similar resolution, providing 80 hours of paid leave to employees whose homes were destroyed.

Some members also worked in facilities that were closed temporarily because of the fires and many are working in conditions with serious smoke issues – especially workers in Santa Paula, Ojai and Ventura. Three Ventura County libraries are still closed because of the fires. SEIU 721 worksite organizers are also helping with individual members’ issues in the field and making sure that those who work outdoors – like employees at the Department of Public Works and the Department of Parks & Recreation – are equipped with appropriate N95 masks to help with the wildfire smoke.

“It’s during times like these when our members truly demonstrate their commitment to their work and to the communities they serve,” Schoonover said. “Catastrophe has struck right in the middle of the holiday season yet our SEIU 721 members are doing their duty. They embody the best in public service.”

Get the latest on evacuation information at <http://www.ReadyVenturaCounty.org> and <http://countyofsb.org/thomasfire.sbc>.

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