

# THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

## Campaign Seeks \$250,000 From Crowdfunding for Drought Relief

August 26, 2015

By Eden Stiffman



All donations by the California Drought Relief Fund will support three organizations that serve people affected by drought and wildfires.

As California approaches its fifth year of drought, a new crowdfunding campaign aims to provide support to local relief organizations that assist families who have run out of water as well as victims of the wildfires ravaging parts of the West Coast.

Launched on August 26 by a coalition of California businesses and nonprofits, the [California Drought Relief Fund](#) hopes to raise \$250,000 by September 30. All donations will support three organizations serving individuals affected by the severe drought and weather disasters, primarily in the state's Central and Salinas Valleys.

The campaign, coordinated by the nonprofit Citizen Engagement Lab Education Fund, also hopes to raise awareness about how climate change contributes to the problem.

Tom Steyer and Kat Taylor, philanthropists who support better understanding of and response to climate-change impacts, provided \$100,000 to launch the fund. Last year, Mr. Steyer and Ms. Taylor, who are married, gave \$2 million to launch a similar fund with the San Francisco Foundation for victims of "climate-related disasters" across the United States.

Four organizations, including the California-based Courage Campaign, the climate-awareness organization 350.org, and Mr. Steyer's political-advocacy group NextGen Climate Action, are asking their members to donate and promote the effort.

Camron Assadi, director of the Climate Relief Fund at the Citizen Engagement Lab Education Fund, says the campaign may continue beyond the summer.

"We're trying to address this immediate need with the emergency drought and the wildfires, but we're also hoping to build into longer-term solutions so California can become more resilient to drought," he says.

Self-Help Enterprises, the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water, and the California Fire Foundation will receive funds from the campaign. The groups were selected based on factors that include a track record of effectiveness, willingness to be transparent and report how the money is used, and public acknowledgment of the connection between climate change and worsening drought conditions.

Self-Help Enterprises, a group that assists low-income families affected by the drought, has been helping homeowners whose wells have gone dry. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has provided its primary source of funding through two grant programs.

"Neither grant will fully fund a well replacement," says Susan Atkins, a program director at the organization. Finding other less-restrictive sources of support has been challenging, she says.

Though the nonprofit has received other small grants and donations, "It's been fairly limited, considering the volume of the need," says Ms. Atkins. "The magnitude of this problem is outrageous."

If the crowdfunding campaign reaches its goal, Self-Help Enterprises plans to use its share of the money to provide water services or tanks to about 10 families, and to provide connections to municipal water systems for about 10 more.

The campaign's goal of raising awareness about how climate change is compounding both the drought and the wildfires makes sense to Lou Paulson, chairman of the California Fire Foundation, another of the recipients.

"We can clearly advocate that climate change is a huge factor in the wildlands season that we're seeing — and in January, February, and March, we'll probably be seeing massive flooding," he says.

The foundation supports the families of firefighters killed in action by offering assistance to departments for funerals, as well as scholarships for their children. The fund also distributes \$100-gift cards to wildfire victims to help them purchase basic necessities like food or clothing immediately after a disaster.

"Unfortunately, this is now the new norm," says Mr. Paulson, who is also president of the California Professional Firefighters union. "It's an important issue that's got to be addressed, and it's not going away."

*Correction: A previous version of this story reported that Tom Steyer and Kat Taylor provided \$100,000 from their TomKat Charitable Trust to launch the nonprofit Citizen Engagement Lab Education Fund. The money was from their personal funds, not the trust.*