

NeighborWorks America

Water tanks deployed to relieve drought in California

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By NeighborWorks America Staff

Most of us take drinking water for granted; turn on the faucet, there it is. But families in California's San Joaquin Valley who rely on groundwater no longer can make this assumption. The unprecedented drought affecting populations already struggling to obtain access to clean drinking water also poses health risks to the elderly, those with health problems and scores of low-income families.

When a well runs dry, it affects every aspect of these families' daily lives — including drinking, cooking, sanitation and personal hygiene. Raphael Surmay lives in East Porterville, CA, the epicenter of the drought — where more than 400 wells are dry. When his own well went dry in June 2015, his family was instantly in crisis.



"We needed to use a bucket to flush the toilet, to wash our dishes, to take a shower," he says.

Families have been forced to take drastic measures to meet their water needs. It's become standard practice for households to run hoses from a neighbor's home to fill storage tanks, transport barrels and buckets of water long distances from the nearest source, and purchase bottled water.

As the drought worsened, NeighborWorks member Self-Help Enterprises (SHE) started receiving calls from residents reporting water shortages. The organization quickly recognized the crisis required immediate attention. It was no surprise SHE would get the calls, with its decades-old work to develop clean water systems and rehab housing. The organization leveraged its reputation and expertise to mobilize quickly and identify a potential interim solution until the community's infrastructure was improved.



SHE installed water tank that provides a limited amount of water to homes with dry wells. A certified potable water hauler fills a 2,500- 3,000-gallon tank with water. With a small pump and PVC pipes, the water is pumped directly into a household's plumbing. For Surmay's family of four, the water tank and pump provided the first water in his home in months. A \$25,000 Drought Mitigation Grant from NeighborWorks America supported the expansion of the interim water tank program to other counties reporting a high number of dry wells.

With Gov. Jerry Brown's declaration of a state of emergency, SHE worked with the California Office of Emergency Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture, various counties, corporate and individual donors, and

other organizations to further expand the water tank program. Today, SHE facilitates water tank programs for Kern, Kings, Fresno, Mariposa, Merced, Tulare and Stanislaus counties. Within a year of the launch of the program, an impressive 1,019 water tanks have been installed at homes with dry wells.

SHE also is ramping up its program to help homeowners access low-interest loans to drill or improve private wells. To date, 42 private wells have been repaired or replaced through the program. A separate, a bottled-water delivery program serves more than 900 families, and new water lines have been extended to 105 homes. In response to a statewide mandate to conserve water, SHE has distributed more than 10,000 water conservation kits to families; they include a bucket, two bathroom aerators, a kitchen aerator, a low-flow showerhead, an auto-shutoff hose nozzle and tablets to detect toilet leaks.

SHE's efforts have helped thousands of families stay in their homes. For Surmay, the drought-relief programs have meant hope. He says, "even though the drought has been hard on us, the water tank is a blessing and we don't lose hope that we'll have a permanent solution soon."

