



## Over 300 Treated in Camp Fire Aftermath, Cases Still Climbing

Preparation, determination and persistence enabled the Northern California Trauma Recovery Network® (Nor-Cal TRN®) volunteers to intervene early with pro bono EMDR therapy for victims of the Camp Fire in Paradise, California. To date 375 individuals have received treatment with many more victims and first responders inquiring about treatment.

The Nor-Cal TRN® group has 85 volunteer EMDR therapy-trained clinicians who have also trained in EMDR Recent Traumatic Episode Protocol and Group Traumatic Episode Protocol (R-TEP/G-TEP). With these resources, the groups cofounders Pennisue Hignell, PhD and Merrill Powers, MSW, LCSW were able to connect over 100 survivors to EMDR therapists within the first 30 days of the fire. As demand for EMDR therapy outpaced volunteer availability, they introduced G-TEP sessions to treat more victims. They also organized a Trauma Recovery/HAP training in R-TEP/G-TEP in December 2018, to increase capacity to treat victims. Dr. Hignell says her goal is “to have all inquiries contacted within 24 hours, and seen by a therapist within one week.”

### Grassroots Breakthrough

Dr. Hignell and fellow coordinator, Keli Schoon, AMFT, took to the streets with an EMDR therapy handout and brochures. They met as many individuals affected by the

Camp Fire as they could to offer trauma recovery treatment. Wherever victims might gather is where they looked – in the Walmart parking lot tent city, in churches, in food lines, and every town meeting, Mayor or Sherriff press conference they could attend. Dr. Hignell’s first breakthrough with this person-by-person effort came when she met with eleven victims at a private home. A ground swell of positive word of mouth in the community soon followed.

In addition to encountering victims where they sheltered, Dr. Hignell made use of social media. She tirelessly posted and shared EMDR information on Camp Fire Facebook pages, as well as the Nor-Cal TRN® Facebook page, to explain common reactions to trauma and offer pro bono treatment to everyone.

### Challenges Great and Small

Today Dr. Hignell reports that, due to the inundation of requests for therapy, volunteers have been travelling into the area from Sacramento, Roseville, Auburn, Nevada City and Redding, CA to provide free EMDR therapy to Camp Fire survivors. Fortunately, the Growing Place, a counseling center in Chico, offered office space for treatment sessions and accommodations for out of town therapists.

In the first days of the fire, Dr. Hignell sought out emergency response agencies, to offer EMDR to first responders and obtain access to victims. She met with the Chico Fire Department’s Chief and head of Human Resources. In addition, she spoke with the Red Cross relief coordinator and VA in Chico. Like many other TRN® groups, she found these agency meetings an unproductive means to introduce EMDR therapy to first responders or anyone affected by the fire. It is becoming more evident to work through these agencies relationships need to be established well in advance of a disaster or community tragedy. The massive success of Nor Cal’s efforts have shown that the most effective way to reach affected populations in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy are through grassroots outreach and methods. As Dr. Hignell says, “Hit the streets and go where the people are!”

Additionally, Dr. Hignell found a major challenge was to coordinate and pair available clinicians with clients. She divided inquiries between herself and Merrill Powers, based on geographical location before then cross-

referencing her volunteer list. The administrative work proved to be quite difficult and she is creating a common database of information, research and outcomes. The last year held unprecedented disaster recovery efforts from TRN® groups like Northern California. Trauma Recovery/HAP will work to improve these processes in the coming year based on feedback from our TRN® volunteers like Dr. Hignell. This will help support volunteers to make sure everyone who wants pro bono EMDR therapy when offered receives it, policies and procedures are clear, and no one falls through the cracks.

### **One Success Story Among Hundreds**

The dramatic healing that victims are experiencing is expressed in Dr. Hignell's pro bono EMDR therapy treatment with one client who scored a 70 on the IES-R (Impact of Events Scale-Revised). In her first session, the client had driven through fire, encountered panicked people along the way and worked at a school that same morning where both parents and students were overwhelmed and traumatized. During that first session, she reported she was not able to concentrate or figure out ways to move forward. She stated, "I feel lost". By the fifth session, the client's IES-R score was an 8. She felt her life was changed for the better saying, "I have learned so many lessons about myself and realized I can handle more than I thought I could. I am strong. I can find peace in the midst of chaos. The fire did not beat me, I beat it."