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LOCAL NEWS

How a vacant housing complex in Redlands is helping firefighters train



The Redlands Fire Department holds live fire training at a vacant housing complex near Orange Street and Lugonia Avenue in Redlands, CA., Sunday, November 5, 2017. (Staff photo by Jennifer Cappuccio Maher/The Facts/SCNG)

By [SANDRA EMERSON](#) | semerson@scng.com | Redlands Daily Facts

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A vacant housing complex in North Redlands that has attracted criminal activity and the homeless, is now helping firefighters train to fight fires.

About 70 fire members of the Redlands Fire Department and CalFire have been conducting [live fire training](#) since Saturday at the complex near the intersection of Orange Street and Lugonia Avenue.

The complex, owned by the San Bernardino County Housing Authority, is being demolished to make way for the next phases of the [Valencia Grove Housing Community](#).

“There’s nothing like going into a real building,” said Redlands Fire Captain David Ketcherside, standing outside a smoky duplex on East Sharon Road on Monday, Nov. 6.

It is difficult to find training opportunities with acquired structures, such as this complex, due to regulations and guidelines set by the Air Quality Management District, Environmental Protection Agency and State Fire Training, Ketcherside said.

This week’s training was approved by the South Coast Air Quality Management District and hazardous materials, such as asbestos, lead paint, carpet/padding and appliances, were removed in advance.

While the firefighters use wood and common combustibles to start the training fires, which do not burn as hot as combustibles found in a common residence, there are other benefits of going into an acquired structure over a training facility, Ketcherside said.

This includes the paint on the walls, the lay out of the building and drywall that can influence the fire, he said.

“The benefit is great because when these guys show up to residential structure fires the residents don’t know how much training you have. They just expect you to have all of it,” Ketcherside said. “It’s my job and our training department’s job to make sure everybody has the right training, so when these guys show up they can deliver a premium service to the community.”

The complex has been vacant since 2016, following the construction of the first phase of the neighboring Valencia Grove Housing Community.

It has attracted homeless activity and some crime.

The Redlands Fire Department has responded to five fires at the complex since it was vacated, Ketcherside said. While he couldn’t pinpoint the exact cause, Ketcherside said the fires were likely associated with homeless on the premises.

[In March](#), a 17-year-old male was stabbed inside one of the boarded up homes on in the complex.

The Redlands Police Department has had several calls to the property and has done several proactive patrols in the area, according to Redlands police Lt. Travis Martinez. Officers came across gang activity and homeless taking shelter in the vacant buildings, he said.

“Anybody that drove through there will obviously notice the blight,” he said. “It just seemed to be a haven for attracting the bad elements.”

The housing authority hired 24-hour security, said Gus Joslin, deputy executive director for the housing authority.

“Anytime you have that number of units vacant at the same time it becomes somewhat of an attractive nuisance,” Joslin said. “So we had to address those challenges. It’s one of the reasons why we’re pushing ahead and demolishing the entire site.”

The housing authority volunteered the property for the training. Redlands police have also used the complex for training over the past few months, according to Joslin.

“It is an opportunity that’s sort of unique when you have that many units vacant at the same time,” Joslin said.

While the complex has been useful in allowing police and fire training, Martinez said, they would rather see it torn down.

“It’s definitely a good thing that construction is finally moving forward and it’s being demolished,” he said.

The Valencia Grove Housing Community’s second phase proposes 104 rental units, while the third phase will include single-family homes on Lugonia Avenue for first-time home buyers.

Construction of the remaining phases is dependent on funding, Joslin said, but the housing authority is hopeful it will begin in 2018.



Sandra Emerson

Sandra Emerson covers the cities of Redlands, Highland and Yucaipa for the Southern California News Group.

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