Tragic but familiar narrative in Camp Fire: Most victims were older, disabled

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Paradise, CA. There are no children on the list of dead from the **Camp Fire**. No teenagers or even young adults have been identified as victims of the disaster. The 46 named victims so far were, on average, 71 years old. The youngest was 39; the oldest 95.

Many had physical disabilities and couldn't flee. Some refused to leave, unable to see, hear or smell the impending danger, or lacking the cognitive abilities to acknowledge it.

They were among the 85 people who died in the Nov. 8 blaze, some in their beds, others just outside their front doors. A few made desperate phone calls to family, friends or emergency responders, begging for rescue.

One by one, as officials confirmed the identities of the dead, their stories offered a tragic but familiar narrative, one of **older, infirm or disabled loved ones disproportionately dying in a disaster**.

Older adults and those with disabilities are at a high risk when disaster strikes, said Ritchie, a professor of medicine who specializes in geriatrics and palliative care.
Consider Hurricane Katrina, where nearly half of the 1,000 victims were 75 years or older, and the average age was 69.

In the 1991 Oakland firestorm, the average age of the 25 victims was 55.

Seniors, even if not disabled, are often at a higher risk because of **declines in their senses and decision-making abilities**, Ritchie said.

They often can't see, smell or hear as well as younger residents, making it harder for them to anticipate the danger of a wildfire. Then add on cognitive challenges, like insight and judgment, or the kinds of issues that make them susceptible to elder abuse. They might not be able to discern immediate danger or know what to do in an emergency, Ritchie said.
It is a "perfect storm" of risk in disasters like the Camp Fire, she added.

Victoria Taft, 66, was at her Paradise home where she lived with her daughter, Christina, when the fire broke out. A neighbor told them to leave, but Victoria refused.
“She didn’t think it was going to be that bad, and **she didn’t receive an alert from any authority,”** Christina said. **“We never got an official evacuation order.”**

As the Camp Fire spread throughout Paradise and the surrounding towns, engulfing homes and schools, **officials did not send Wireless Emergency Alerts, or WEAs: Amber Alert-style evacuation notices** to all area cell phones. But even if they had, many of the area’s older residents used landlines, and **cell service in Paradise was spotty**.

Officials did use the CodeRed system to reach people who had opted in to get emergency alerts, sending about 5,000 emails, 26,000 reverse-911 calls and 5,400 text messages.

Despite the disproportionate number of older adults and disabled among the list of dead, Cal Fire Deputy Chief Scott McLean knew it could have been worse, much worse, given the number of retirees in the burned out communities.

Of the 26,000 residents in Paradise, 25 percent — or around 6,500 — were older than 65 in 2017, according to a U.S. census estimate. By comparison, 14 percent of California residents were older than 65. Nearly 1 in 5 Paradise residents under 65 lived with a disability, almost three times the share of disabled Californians under 65.

The dozens of senior homes and communities had evacuation plans in place and successfully transported most of their residents to safety, he said.

And amid the tragic deaths, there were many unbelievable stories of survival, he said.
As the fire raged through Paradise, McLean was there, helping evacuate residents when he saw, through the smoky darkness, a figure in the distance, perhaps an animal, he initially thought.

It was an older woman in a wheelchair, a fluffy dog in her lap, rolling down the road.
“She had thrown her wheelchair out the door, crawled out, grabbed the dog, grabbed the purse and she was leaving town wheeling down the hill,” he said.

He loaded her into his truck and took her to Feather River Hospital, where she would be safe.

“She called me the other day,” he said. “We’re going to go get dinner.”