Making a clean sweep of things after a fire disaster

by Jennifer Davies

SAN DIEGO - Even before the fires began to die down, Phil Fitzpatrick was preparing for a busy month. A director of personnel for ServiceMaster, a national company that cleans up houses damaged by fire or other disasters, Fitzpatrick was already fielding job requests even as the Southern California wildfires were still raging.

AFTER THE FIRES - Jason Evans of Paul Davis Restoration steam cleaned the carpet of a house in San Diego. He's so busy, 'I'm kissing my wife of 33 years and giving her pictures of me and saying, 'I may see you in a month.' ' CNS Photo by K.C. Alfred. Companies such as ServiceMaster are seeing a predictable uptick in business as homeowners deal with the aftermath of the deadly fires that raged through San Diego County. To help with problems ranging from a thin layer of soot to blackened walls to the lingering smell of smoke, cleaning companies are being hired to return homes to their former glory.

The service in many cases is covered by insurance and can relieve the homeowner of the tedious task of cleaning every nook and cranny, from inside kitchen cupboards to behind electrical outlets.

Demand is so high that companies are adding to their ranks. Paul Davis Restoration, a national company with operations in San Diego, typically has about 30 employees in the area. The company has beefed up its local team to 50 and is expecting to bring in an additional 35 Paul Davis employees from such cities as Houston.

"We are absolutely swamped," said Per Svedlund, owner of the Paul Davis Restoration franchise in San Diego.

Although the firestorm in 2003 burned down more houses, Svedlund said, this year's fires may turn out to be busier for companies such as his. "I think these fires were more spread out so there are a lot more homes with smoke damage," he said.

Also, with the fires coming just four years after the last disaster, homeowners are more aware of cleaning services.

"More people know that their house can be cleaned and that they are not completely on their own," said Jason Evans, a lead technician for Paul Davis Restoration. Evans and his team of five workers have spent the past three days cleaning up the indoor and outdoor areas of a home near the Carmel Valley neighborhood. While the home was some distance from the fires, it smelled smoky and was covered with soot, especially the patio furniture, Evans said.

"I wish you could have got before and after pictures," said Linda Wiggins, one of the technicians working on the house. She pointed to a cluster of lightly colored lounges in the corner and added, "That furniture was black."

Insurance companies and industry experts say not all cleaners are the same. Be wary of businesses that go door to door and ask for cash upfront, said Tully Lehman, a spokesman for the Insurance Information Network of California, a trade group for the insurance industry.

The key is for homeowners to have open communications with their insurance provider about what is and what is not covered, he said.

"You get these guys saying, 'I can do it for you and you won't have to file a claim,'" Lehman said. "Well, that's why you have insurance."

The price charged by established companies can be daunting for many homeowners.

Fitzpatrick said the price depends on the size of the house and the extent of the damage. He estimated that to clean a home, including walls, carpets, upholstery and duct work, typically costs $3,000 to $4,500.

For those who want to tackle the soot themselves, there is a science to cleaning up a house damaged by smoke, said Jeff Bishop, technical adviser for the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification. The institute was founded by cleaning companies to maintain industry standards.

The key is to remember that gravity is your friend, Bishop said, so always start with the ceiling and move your way down.

And don't add water to the mix, he added, as dry soot removal is always easier. Bishop said that when vacuuming the floor and upholstery, make sure to use a top-notch filter. Otherwise, he said, soot could just be blown back into the air.

One of the benefits of hiring professional companies is that they have special equipment, such as HEPA filters, that makes soot removal easier.

Paul Berg, owner of the ServiceMaster franchise in El Cajon, Calif., recommends beginning the cleaning process early, because the soot has a lot of chemicals that can quickly yellow plastics and other surfaces.

"The main thing is to get it done as quickly as possible," he said.

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