

September 2023



THE  
BOULDER  
WATERSHED  
COLLECTIVE

2023 Capstone Team

# PROJECT BRIEF



---

Prepared By  
Sierra Brown  
Isabel Lisle  
Liz McDonald

# Building Wildfire Resiliency in Boulder County: A Community Leader Approach

*What are the specific needs and gaps in Boulder County with regards to preparing, mitigating, recovering, and living with wildfires? How might a community leader model fill those gaps?*

## Project Background

Boulder County, Colorado stretches across 740 square miles of both wildland and wildland-urban interface landscapes and has a long history of engagement with wildfire preparedness initiatives. The majority of Boulder County's population lives in fire-adapted ecosystems near high wildfire risk grassland ecosystems, sparking concern about ways to prepare for potential future wildfire impacts. In the wake of the 2021 Marshall Fire, which destroyed 1,084 homes and seven commercial structures within Boulder County, local agencies have sensed urgency from the community to build back better through a coordinated umbrella approach to fire resiliency planning and communication ([Marshall Fire Operational After-Action Report, 2022](#)). However, no one organization working on wildfire resilience has the ability to meet the needs of this growing demand from Boulder County residents.

Across the nation, agencies have created **Wildfire Community Leader Models** as an approach to building community wildfire resilience. These models utilize neighborhood leaders to promote neighborhood-specific fire mitigation initiatives, provide resources and information to residents, and foster communication around wildfire response - effectively building prepared and resilient communities.

Communities in Boulder have specifically asked for county-level leadership to "initiate a coordinated effort that would identify gaps, leverage efficiencies, and establish a wildfire resiliency program that is visible to the residents" (Marshall Fire Recovery Groups, 2022). Our team will address these requests and streamline efforts by supporting a wildfire community leader approach that considers both the opportunities and challenges unique to Boulder County.

## Purpose

Our project purpose is to provide the [Boulder Watershed Collective](#) with a comprehensive recommendation for a wildfire community leader model that is cross-agency supported, community-driven, and resilient in a fiery future.

The first goal of our project is to analyze the challenges, and strengths from existing nation-wide community leader models to inform our recommendations. The second goal involves collaborating with wildfire professionals and community members within Boulder County to envision wildfire preparedness on an achievable scale.



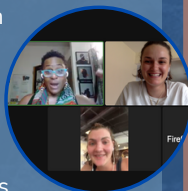
Figure 1: "The Marshall Fire continues to burn out of control near Broomfield on Dec. 30, 2021." RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post, 2021.

## Methodology

Our team has reviewed current national wildfire community leader models, conducted a social science investigation of ongoing wildfire preparedness work in and around Boulder, and will recommend a community leader framework for agencies to look toward.

### Analysis of Existing Efforts

Our graduate student team has conducted an analysis of existing programs nationally as well as strengths, gaps, and needs in wildfire efforts across Boulder County through an extensive media review process and through conducting 17 one-on-one interviews with wildfire and community resilience professionals.



### Stakeholder Engagement

Working with an equity consultant, our team organized and facilitated a focus group of Boulder wildfire professionals as well as a community-focused wildfire workshop to provide insight into wildfire professionals and community representatives' shared understanding of wildfire risk and preparedness.

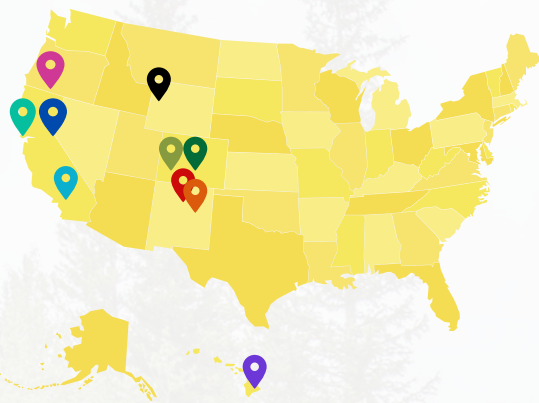


### Synthesis and Recommendations

Our team is utilizing a qualitative data analysis approach to connect themes and key takeaways from literature, interviews, and focus group data. This analysis will be the backbone of our recommendations for a community leader approach to wildfire resilience.



# National Models



- **Santa Fe, NM:**  
Forest Stewards Guild
- **Santa Fe, NM:**  
The Greater Santa Fe Fireshed Coalition
- **Southwest Colorado:**  
Wildfire Adapted Partnership
- **Lake Tahoe, CA:**  
Tahoe Fire Adapted Communities
- **Multiple Locations, CA:**  
4th Grade Preparedness Ambassadors
- **Jackson County, OR:**  
FireBrand Resiliency Collective
- **Teton County, WY:**  
Teton Area Wildfire Protection Coalition
- **North Sonoma County, CA:**  
North Sonoma COPE
- **Crestone, CO:**  
Crestone Fire Department
- **Hawaii-Pacific, HI:**  
Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization

Figure 2: Map of organizations included in our analysis of existing programs utilizing a community leader model structure. Pins represent approximate locations.

# Boulder-Based Stakeholders

-  Boulder Disaster Management, Climate Equity Specialist, Recovery and Resiliency Division
-  City of Boulder Fire Rescue, Boulder Housing Partners
-  Marshall Restoring Our Community, Superior Disaster Recovery
-  Community Groups (HOAs, Mobile Home Communities)
-  Wildfire Partners, Mountain Steward Groups, The Watershed Center, Saws and Slaws
-  CU Boulder Earth Lab, Research Groups

# Identified Model Attributes

In an analysis of existing models, our team looked toward external conditions, community characteristics, and specific attributes of models. We centered on these factors to better understand the initial stages and long-term viability of programs utilizing community leader models. Specifically, attributes we considered as necessary for a successful model include **clear and defined roles, action on the ground, spatial scalability, equity, and measurable impacts.**

As we moved toward an analysis of current efforts within Boulder County, we considered those attributes overlaid with the strengths, gaps, and opportunities within the existing wildfire resilience space locally.

# Key Findings

As we examined existing examples of community-led wildfire initiatives, we have discovered key attributes and conditions that a successful model in Boulder must include. While we shape our recommendations, we will explore how community leaders' responsibilities are defined and the value of offering stipends for volunteer time. Further, types of resources and their accessibility, as well as how communication platforms function equitably across communities, leaders, and agencies are all imperative components. And yet, a model operating in Boulder County will be novel, so we must overlay national successes with the needs and strengths of the local community.

# Deliverables



## Internal report for BWC:

1

This extensive report will be focused on the analysis of three different research questions around the specific needs and gaps in Boulder County with regards to preparing, mitigating, recovering, and living with wildfire. The report will provide a comprehensive recommendation for the creation of a cross-agency supported and community-driven wildfire Community Leader Model.

## Agency-facing report:

2

The report will include our recommendations for developing a community leader framework in Boulder and will outline the top priorities agencies can take to address wildfire resilience. It will include examples of existing community-led programs in Boulder, areas where agencies can connect and share resources and a community-facing communication recommendation.



# Acknowledgments

Thank you to our Academic Advisor, Dr. Meghan McCarroll; Maya MacHamer and Erin Fried at Boulder Watershed Collective; our equity consultant Taishya Adams; Austin Carabajal for his translation services; our National and Boulder based interviewees; the broader Boulder community; and all others who have supported this project!

# References

Marshall Fire Operational After-Action Report. (2022). Boulder County Sheriff's Office.  
 Marshall Fire Recovery Groups. (2022). UBC Committee, Superior Rising, Marshall Together, Marshall ROC. Letter to Boulder County Commissioners.  
 The Boulder Watershed Collective. (n.d.). <https://www.boulderwatershedcollective.com/>