

MUNICIPAL INNOVATION CASE STUDY

City of Nevada City, California • Office of Emergency Services • April 2024–January 2026

When Neighbors Are the Strategy

Nevada City’s Neighbor-to-Neighbor Wildfire Preparedness Initiative

How a small Sierra Nevada foothill city built neighborhood trust for wildfire resilience through hyper-local engagement, hands-on volunteer workdays, and unlikely partnerships.

192+ RESIDENTS FORMALLY ENGAGED	~235 REACHED INFORMALLY	35 NEIGHBORHOOD EVENTS	350 VOLUNTEER HOURS	35 T HAZARDOUS FUELS REMOVED
---	-----------------------------------	----------------------------------	-------------------------------	--

Note: Formal engagement figures reflect signed-in participants. An additional ~235 residents were reached through informal, neighbor-led interactions that could not be systematically captured.

The Challenge

Nevada City is a historic foothill community of roughly 3,000 residents, compressed into just 2.2 square miles along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada. Its forested setting and proximity to the Yuba River watershed define both its identity and its risk profile. Wildfire is not a theoretical threat here. It is the single greatest ongoing danger to the city’s public safety, housing stock, and cultural heritage.

The disasters at Paradise, Greenville, and Lahaina gave Nevada City’s leadership a stark frame of reference. Small towns can disappear in a matter of hours. The question was not whether Nevada City faced this risk, but how prepared its residents actually were at the neighborhood level.

At the start of the grant period, only two Firewise communities existed in Nevada City. Large portions of the city lacked coordinated prevention efforts and neighborhood-level organizations. Preparedness knowledge was inconsistent, participation in city-led initiatives was limited, and persistent mistrust existed between some residents and City staff. Digital outreach missed many, especially older residents with limited internet access.

Being part of a Firewise community means taking responsibility not just for our own homes, but for each other. Neighbor-to-Neighbor strengthens those connections and helps our neighborhood be safer and more resilient to wildfire.

— KERRY ROSE, FIREWISE COMMUNITY LEADER

Program Design

Nevada City's Office of Emergency Services (OES) designed the Neighbor-to-Neighbor program as a direct part of the city's wildfire safety plan, not as a separate project. The focus was simple: wildfire preparedness in a small community relies on people, not just tools. If neighbors don't know or trust each other, or see value in working together, information and equipment alone won't reduce their risk.

The program focused on three neighborhoods: Pioneer Park, Deer Creek Southside, and Cashin's Field, with additional outreach in Champion Mine. The Fire Safety Advisory Committee provided ongoing coordination between residents, City staff, and elected officials.

OES prioritized in-person engagement and partnerships with trusted organizations instead of digital-first outreach. The program was structured around repeated face-to-face contact to support preparedness education and trust-building.

The Neighbor-to-Neighbor program enhances the strength of Nevada City by promoting shared responsibility for wildfire preparedness. When neighbors are connected and informed, we are better equipped to respond to wildfires and recover together.

— COUNCILMEMBER PETERSEN

Implementation

— Wildfire Defense Days: Action as Engagement

The Wildfire Defense Days were the core implementation strategy: neighborhood-scale volunteer workdays focused on defensible space cleanups, vegetation management, home-hardening education, and evacuation-route awareness. Volunteer labor focused on helping households that couldn't do the work independently, with Firewise community members coordinating support.

Over the course of the program, three homes received this support. City staff removed 35 tons of hazardous material using green waste roll-offs. Cleared yards, safer roofs, and marked evacuation routes were visible proof to everyone, not just volunteers. Working together built trust better than presentations or meetings.

— The Year of the Neighborhood and Organic Pod Formation

In the 2024–2025 term, Mayor Petersen formally designated the period as the “Year of the Neighborhood,” issuing a proclamation that aligned city-wide civic identity with the Neighbor-to-Neighbor program’s goals. The designation did more than brand the initiative; it legitimized neighborhood-scale action as core city business and provided OES with a civic frame to anchor their outreach.

As trust grew, residents started forming their own pods: small, informal clusters who checked in on one another, shared resources, and met outside City events. By the end of the grant period, three pods had formed, organizing activities from defensible space coordination to informal welfare checks. Residents connected through N2N events also moved into formal civic roles, joining community committees, demonstrating increased civic capacity.

— Partner Ecosystem

Three organizational partners were essential to the program’s reach and credibility:

PARTNER	ROLE
Sierra Roots	Outreach and inclusion of unhoused and housing-insecure residents; co-creator of wallet-sized emergency information cards; Fire to Frost events
Wildfire Ready Coalition of Nevada County	Firewise community formation, preparedness training, and leadership frameworks for newly established communities
Design for Emergency Management	Created Community Inspired Evacuation Maps, the foundation for a neighborhood-level evacuation workshop series

The Sierra Roots partnership was especially important. By working with people without stable housing, who are often left out of preparedness efforts, OES and Sierra Roots created small emergency info cards for those without permanent addresses. They held three joint events, including Fire to Frost, a clothing and food drive that took place during a federal shutdown. More Fire to Frost events are planned.

— North Pine Pocket Park

Using N2N program funds, the City initiated the development of a new pocket park on a city-owned parcel adjacent to the Doris Foley Historical Library on North Pine Street, a tree-shaded, gently sloped space just steps from downtown’s Broad and Commercial Streets. The park is designed to promote social well-being and neighborhood connection, provide green space and urban wildlife habitat, and create a peaceful public gathering place. It represents the program’s recognition that social infrastructure, physical space where neighbors can simply be together, is itself a form of resilience investment.

— Earned Media and Public Visibility

The program generated meaningful earned media coverage that amplified its reach beyond direct participants. KVMR News covered the new Community-Inspired Evacuation Maps. The City’s own communications team published coverage of the Critical Wildfire Evacuation Workshop Series and

the Fun Toolkit for Firewise Get Togethers, co-developed with Fire Safe Nevada County Coalition. The “Hearts on Fire” fundraiser, co-sponsored with Nevada City OES, brought together art, music, and community benefit for the Wildfire-Ready Coalition. The Neighbor-to-Neighbor theme was also adopted by the CHAMP Hall Art Gallery, extending the program’s public presence into Nevada City’s cultural sector.

Outcomes

The program’s outcomes can be clearly defined at two levels: measurable improvements in preparedness infrastructure, such as expanding the number of Firewise communities; and qualitative progress in resident trust and neighborhood civic engagement, demonstrated by the formation of self-sustaining neighborhood pods that support collective action.

OUTCOME	RESULT
New Firewise communities established	3
Organic neighborhood preparedness pods formed	3
Hazardous fuels removed (Wildfire Defense Days)	35 tons
Individual properties assisted through volunteer days	3
Residents from N2N now serving on community committees	Yes

At the structural level, the program led to the creation of three new Firewise communities, increasing the total from two to five. Each new community has its own leadership framework and is supported, but not dependent on, the City infrastructure. This expansion significantly reinforced Nevada City’s capability for coordinated wildfire preparedness.

On the qualitative side, the formation of three organic neighborhood pods stands out. These self-organized groups of neighbors, which the City did not initiate or maintain, demonstrate the community’s growing capacity for collective preparedness and mutual support. The involvement of residents in civic roles, such as serving on community committees, further demonstrates the program’s success in building lasting civic capacity alongside preparedness knowledge. As Jo Ann Fites of the Wildfire Ready Coalition put it:

Firewise Communities are all about neighbors helping neighbors and building community to become more wildfire ready. It’s a big undertaking to be prepared for wildfires whether it’s safe evacuations or making homes ember resistant. It’s less daunting when you are in it together with your neighbors.

— JO ANN FITES, WILDFIRE READY COALITION OF NEVADA COUNTY

Mike Cannatella of Sierra Roots captured the relational dimension of what the program achieved: “City staff’s openness, creativity, and genuine care for community resilience strengthened Sierra Roots’ preparedness and response capacity, while fostering a collaborative culture grounded in both competence and humanity.” That kind of institutional relationship, built on trust, not contract, is precisely the preparedness infrastructure that survives the end of a grant cycle.

Lessons for Other Cities

01 For older and digitally underserved populations, in-person contact is the program.

Nevada City’s decision to reject digital-first outreach in favor of door-to-door conversations, neighborhood gatherings, and repeated face-to-face contact was not a concession to limited capacity. It was strategic. For communities with significant older populations or uneven internet access, the channel is part of the message. Trust is built through presence, not pixels. Cities designing preparedness programs for similar demographics should budget time and staffing for direct contact rather than treating it as a last resort.

02 Visible, physical action generates trust faster than information alone.

The Wildfire Defense Days model, bringing neighbors together to do visible, tangible work on a shared problem, engaged residents who would not have attended a preparedness meeting or workshop. Collective physical labor is both an outcome and a relationship-building mechanism. Cities looking to engage harder-to-reach residents should consider how action-oriented events can lower the barriers that passive information sessions cannot.

03 Mayoral framing amplifies grassroots work.

The Year of the Neighborhood proclamation gave OES’s neighborhood-level work civic legitimacy, accelerating resident engagement. Executive framing, a mayor or city manager publicly designating something as a priority, signals to residents that their participation matters to the institution. It costs almost nothing and can meaningfully accelerate adoption.

04 Design for populations that emergency programs typically miss.

The Sierra Roots partnership and the wallet-sized emergency information cards for unhoused residents represent a model of inclusive preparedness that most municipal emergency programs do not attempt. Cities with significant unhoused or housing-insecure populations face a genuine equity gap in preparedness, these residents are often most vulnerable in a wildfire yet least served by standard outreach. Partnering with organizations that already have the trust of those populations is the most direct path to closing that gap.

05 Self-organizing capacity is the best sustainability indicator.

The three organic neighborhood pods that formed during the grant period are a more meaningful sustainability indicator than any continuation budget line. When residents organize themselves, without City prompting, without formal structure. They have internalized the value of collective action. Programs should measure and report organic organizing activity as a primary outcome, not a secondary anecdote.

Conclusion

Nevada City's Neighbor-to-Neighbor program demonstrates something important about the limits of conventional emergency preparedness strategy: information is necessary but not sufficient. Knowing that a wildfire is dangerous does not make a neighborhood safer. What makes a neighborhood safer is whether residents know each other well enough to coordinate, trust the City enough to participate, and feel capable of acting.

Building that kind of capacity in a community of 3,000 people, with a small OES team, a tight geography, and partners willing to work toward a shared goal, required rejecting the shortcuts that make preparedness programs easy to design but hard to sustain. It required showing up repeatedly, working alongside residents rather than instructing them, extending the program's reach to populations that other initiatives had not prioritized, and treating the visible environment itself, a cleared defensible space, a new pocket park, an evacuation map on a wall, as part of the preparedness infrastructure.

The result is a city that is measurably better prepared, not because it distributed more information, but because more of its residents know their neighbors, trust their government, and have practiced what collective action looks like before the next fire comes.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

LEAD AGENCY City of Nevada City Office of Emergency Services (OES)

FOCUS NEIGHBORHOODS Pioneer Park, Deer Creek Southside, Cashin's Field, Champion Mine

CORE PARTNERS Sierra Roots, Wildfire Ready Coalition of Nevada County, Design for Emergency Management

FUNDING California Volunteers / Governor's Office of Planning and Research, Neighbor-to-Neighbor Initiative