

Glenn County Public Works men rescue woman from fire

By Tim Crews
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Orland — She'd be dead if the Glenn County road workers hadn't acted. Risking their own lives, two Glenn County Road workers drove under live downed power lines and helped 97-year-old Dorothy Burris get out of her burning mobile during Tuesday's windstorm. As they neared the door, the place became engulfed in smoke.

As their supervisor called in the fire at 12:17 p.m., Wayne Ball and Brooks von Bargaen saw the top of the mobile home at 6390 County Road 24 smoking. Dispatch records show that it was not known if there was anyone inside or not. In an interview after work Thursday, Mr. Ball recalled "The lady across the street — we were telling her not to use her phone because there were hot wires across the phone cable — she said, 'There's an elderly woman in there.'" Just 21 seconds after his first call, road boss Dennis Ramirez relayed that information to the sheriff's office saying that no one could get through the power lines to get the woman out.

The neighbor, Charlotte Turner, said that she was going in to get the woman out. Without hesitation, the men drove through and under tangled power lines, the same lines that started the fire, and found the woman seemingly retreating from the door. She was going to the switch that opened the door for her and when the men got inside, they got her into a sweater and helped her out.

Mrs. Burris refused to be carried, but was steadied by the men. She was on her walker, taking very small steps, Mr. Von Bargaen said, demonstrating that they were cautious baby steps. "A matter of 60 seconds," said Mr. Ball, and the place filled with dense smoke. Mr. Ball, 54, and Mr. von Bargaen, 37, and their supervisor, Mr. Ramirez, 49, are matter-of-fact about the rescue. Another few moments, they said, and she would have been dead. The sheriff's office was notified she was out at 12:22, five minutes after the first call. The road workers were in the burning mobile home longer than they thought. As they got the woman out, her son, Dave Smith was approaching with a wheelchair. A good thing, Mr. Ball said, because they had no idea what they were going to do with her in the storm.

Mr. Smith had been at the other end of the property and had to go around a chain link fence that was energized by the downed lines. After Mrs. Burris was settled in the chair and helped to shelter, Mr. Smith insisted on going into the burning mobile to fetch his mother's vital paperwork and perhaps medication contained in a small box. Mr. Ball was not thrilled about the idea of going back in. He said, "You could not breathe" because the smoke was so thick. But Mr. Smith was insistent so Mr. Ball recalls with a shrug that he followed Mr. Smith but "had a hold of the back of his shirt" and was prepared to drag him out if need be. Mr. Smith, who lost his wife last year, said Friday morning that he is

emotionally overwhelmed by the latest turn of events. He was exceedingly grateful that his mother was helped to safety. He had no recollection of going into the burning mobile at all. Mr. Ramirez thinks it's all in a day's work, really. "Like law enforcement, we are here to protect and serve." The three men have been with Glenn County Public Works for many years. Mr. Von Barga has 20 years in; Mr. Ball has 18 and Mr. Ramirez has 16. There was praise from management, Deputy Director of Planning and Public Works Randy Murphy said, "I am proud to be associated with these men who made quick decisions and acted immediately." While product of his employees, he wasn't surprised. "People often forget that public works crews are often among the first responders – or are the first responders — to flooding, accidents and other emergencies."