NorCal Dogs Help Search For Missouri Tornado Survivors
May 23, 2011 11:53 PM

JOPLIN, Missouri (CBS / AP) — Rescue crews, including some search dogs from Northern California, dug through piles of splintered houses and crushed cars Monday in the search for survivors of a half-mile-wide tornado that killed at least 116 people when it blasted much of the Missouri town of Joplin off the map.

Seventeen people were pulled alive from the rubble as teams of searchers fanned out in waves across several square miles. Many of the groups included specially trained dogs like Huck and Jagger, two Northern California “rescued dogs turned rescuers,” said Janet Reineck, spokeswoman for the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation.

She noted that Huck was discovered at San Francisco’s East Bay Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and Jagger was found at the Haven Humane Society near Redding.

Joplin City Manager Mark Rohr said the twister cut a path nearly 6 miles long and more than a half-mile wide through the center of the gritty, blue-collar town of 50,000 people about 160 miles south of Kansas City. Much of the city’s south side was leveled, with churches, schools, businesses and homes reduced to ruins.

“We’re still in search-and-rescue mode,” Rohr told CBS News. “We have a lot of structures that have been damaged and completely fallen to the ground, and we’ve got a lot of volunteers coming in, along with city forces and nearby forces that are going around into those damaged areas, seeking survivors and trying to affect a rescue for those people that are trapped.”

As rescuers toiled in the debris, a strong thunderstorm lashed the crippled city. Rescue crews had to move gingerly around downed power lines and jagged chunks of debris as they hunted for victims and hoped for survivors. Fires, gas fumes and unstable buildings posed constant threats.

The teams and their dogs went door to door, making quick checks of property that in many places had been stripped to its foundations or had its walls collapse.

Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon said while he feared the death toll would rise, he also expected more survivors to be found in the rubble.

“I don’t think we’re done counting,” Nixon said, adding, “I still believe that because of the size of the debris and the number of people involved that there are lives to be saved.”