

Evacuees, volunteers describe inadequate services, police harassment at Houston convention center

Tom Hall reporting from Houston
14 September 2017

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team went to the George R. Brown Convention Center in downtown Houston on Sunday, where approximately 1,200 people are still stranded in a temporary shelter two weeks after Hurricane Harvey caused record flooding in Southeast Texas.

More than 3,000 people were still in the Brown Convention Center and the NRG Center to the southwest, the city's two main hurricane shelters, over the weekend, according to local press reports. While this is down considerably from its peak in the days immediately following the storm, when more than 10,000 sought shelter at the NRG Center alone, those who remain are largely those in the most dire situations; homeowners who lost everything and have nowhere to go back to, homeless people who had nowhere to go in the first place, and the elderly and people with health issues seeking treatment at the shelters' medical facilities.

The two facilities where the shelters are located are lucrative centers of the city's tourism industry, hosting the lion's share of the more than 400 conventions held in Houston last year, with an estimated total economic impact of \$253 million. Moreover, they are both located within walking distance of the city's major professional sports venues, with the NRG Center across the parking lot from the city's professional football stadium.

Consequently, the city's business community and political establishment are eager to return both buildings to normal operations as quickly as possible, even though many of the thousands left in the shelter have no place else to go.

The Red Cross is seeking to wind down its operations

at the convention center "in the near future," and the NRG Center's shelter will close within two to three weeks, according to a local radio station. Plans announced last week by the city to convert a downtown warehouse into housing for up to 300 evacuees from the convention center will do nothing to seriously address the needs of thousands of people who lost everything in the storm.

Undoubtedly, another consideration is that the sight of thousands of destitute hurricane victims in highly visible public areas clashes with the dominant narrative in the media and political establishment of a rapid improvement in conditions throughout the city, aimed at downplaying the real scope of the social disaster after the hurricane, which was greatly exacerbated by decades of negligence and widespread poverty and social inequality. This was signaled more than a week ago by Democratic Mayor Sylvester Turner, even before the floodwaters had fully been drained out of many areas, when he declared, "The city of Houston is open for business," in comments delivered to the press from the convention center. His comments echoed those made by Trump the day before, when he declared, "As tough as this was, it's been a wonderful thing ... They're [the refugees] really happy with what's going on."

WSWS reporters encountered a clash of contrasts, with hundreds of destitute evacuees sitting outside the convention center in one of the most affluent commercial areas of downtown Houston. The orange wristbands they wore which entitled them to re-enter the shelter also effectively barred them from entering the other buildings in the area, with nearby hotels and restaurants, accustomed to catering to a wealthier

clientele, beefing up security to prevent evacuees from entering to get a meal or to escape the Texas summer heat.

A constant complaint from evacuees and from volunteers was the violent and arbitrary treatment meted out to the shelter's residents by Houston police and by security personnel, who treat the evacuees as potential criminals. Many said that they had witnessed or themselves have been the victims of harassment or even assault by police. Interviewees also complained about the completely inadequate provisions made available to the evacuees at the convention center.

Reporters spoke to Zane Ford and Katie Scott, a young couple who had recently been engaged before the hurricane and were in the process of moving out of the shelter. They had recently purchased a home, which was wiped out in the hurricane. When they reached the convention center a week ago they had not eaten for three days. At first, they found the Red Cross staff sympathetic and helpful. "Some Red Cross members and volunteers gave us 20 dollar bills and people would leave food at our cot while we were sleeping," they said. However, the situation began to change over the past few days. A couple of days before, two Red Cross officials had threatened to have them arrested for "having an attitude."

The couple also described the discrimination they faced from nearby businesses. Katie explained that they had been refused service in a nearby restaurant because they "looked like they didn't belong here."

The WSWS also spoke to Margaret, a veterinarian who had come to volunteer her time to help the many evacuees in the shelter with pets. She stressed the importance of animals when people are struggling with stressful situations. When asked how conditions were inside, Margaret responded, "it was hard to work through." She stated that everything was relatively clean, but people weren't treated as they should be.

She noted the lack of proper nutrition in the food being given to the refugees. "I don't understand why they can't have hot meals." She noted that, even as they fail to provide evacuees with basic nutritional needs, the CEO of the Red Cross, Gail McGovern, makes an astronomical salary, reportedly taking home a total compensation of over \$1 million in 2010. Margaret expressed her frustration at the situation and was tempted to buy eggs or other simple foods that could be

made into nutritious meals for those at the center.

When Tiffany Cofield, a former teacher, saw our reporting team, she flagged us down and immediately requested to be interviewed. She reported that police tasered her 66-year-old uncle, John Von Jones, Jr., after an altercation over his dog. She did not know where he was and said that police had told her it would take up to 72 hours for her family to be notified of his whereabouts. "They've kicked out people for no reason, they've attacked people for no reason," Tiffany said.

Tiffany said that food served at the convention center was consistently of poor quality, with residents relying on care packages handed out by charities and private individuals outside the building for decent meals. "Yesterday, for breakfast, we had a pudding cup and some peaches. It's too much," she said. "Everybody's frantic. If you didn't have PTSD before, you have it now. If you didn't have stress or anxiety, you definitely have it now."

"You feel like you're at Harris County Jail," she continued. "They assume that if you're here you must be indigent, or lazy, or have no education." She said that evacuees are not allowed to bring people in; shortly before she spoke to the WSWS, police had turned away a woman who had volunteered to do her hair to help her prepare for a job interview.

Tiffany criticized the mainstream media for its silence on the real conditions in the convention center, stating, "there are so many people who are actually willing to do interviews, [and] there's nobody here."

Tiffany directed WSWS reporters to her Instagram page, where she posted videos of conditions inside the convention center and her thoughts about the treatment of people there. Several hours after the WSWS interviewed her, she posted a video of Houston police kicking her out of the shelter, followed by a video, apparently filmed at a police station, announcing that she had been arrested.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact