

“You can't depend on our government anymore to help”

Watch: Hurricane Harvey victims applying for federal aid encounter government indifference

Tom Hall and Charles Abelard reporting from Houston
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Last week, a reporting team for the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Hurricane Harvey victims seeking federal aid in Houston.

According to the Texas Division of Emergency Management, over 185,000 homes were destroyed or damaged during Hurricane Harvey, by some estimates the costliest natural disaster in American history. The scale of the devastation caused by the storm is the direct consequence of decades of infrastructure neglect and unplanned development which has made the Houston metropolitan area particularly vulnerable to flooding.

The vast majority of homeowners impacted by Harvey have no flood insurance, and many were surprised to discover that their homeowner's insurance would not cover the damage caused by the hurricane. Consequently, many residents have been forced to seek out federal aid as their only source of financial assistance.

More than 286,000 applications filed for assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), according to the *Houston Press*. However, the Trump administration has proposed only \$15 billion in FEMA assistance, a small fraction of the estimated total cost of \$180 billion. Around \$3 billion has also been made available by the Small Business Administration, in the form of loans.

Moreover, FEMA assistance through the Disaster Relief Fund is capped at a paltry \$33,000, with most applicants receiving far less. The main purpose of this funding is not to help make whole people who were affected by the storm, but to provide temporary housing

in hotels and mobile homes. “We will never be able to bring people back to where they were prior to disaster — that's what insurance and loans are for,” FEMA spokesman Bob Howard told the *Houston Press*. In other words, victims of Hurricane Harvey must pay for their own recovery.

The government's insistence that flood victims must shoulder the burden of rebuilding was also demonstrated by the announcement last week by Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner that he would seek a temporary hike in the property tax rate to pay for local recovery efforts.

The site which our reporters visited is one of three set up by FEMA in metropolitan Houston to receive residents who had been denied federal assistance, whose assistance was totally inadequate for their needs, or who have had difficulty navigating the application process. It is located in a vacant storefront in an economically depressed Greenspoint shopping mall, known among locals as “Gunpoint” because of the frequent shootings and petty thefts which take place there. The small but steady stream of people making their way to the assistance center encountered a half-dozen state troopers and mall security guards clustered at the entrance to handle frustrated or irate applicants.

WSWS reporters spoke to John, a restaurant worker, and Veronica, a dispatcher for a local construction company, about their experiences during the storm and their thoughts about the government response to the hurricane.



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