

# Weeks after hurricanes in Texas and Florida: Government aid scarce, tens of thousands still displaced

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Nearly two months after Hurricane Harvey slammed Texas and weeks after Irma devastated Florida, residents in both states attempting to piece their lives back together confront indifference and neglect from the federal government.

A front-page article in yesterday's *New York Times* noted that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) "has taken weeks to inspect damaged homes and apartments, delaying flood victims' attempts to rebuild their lives and properties." The article added that people who call the agency's help line routinely wait on hold for hours before even speaking with a FEMA representative. One person estimated that he had spent at least 16 hours attempting to reach someone at FEMA since Hurricane Harvey hit Texas at the end of August, thus far without success.

The agency, which is understaffed and was almost out of cash even before the recent hurricanes, has been overwhelmed by applications for federal assistance, according to the *Times*. However, a major factor in the backlog of cases is the onerous nature of the requirements for recipients of aid from the agency, which includes an in-person inspection of applicants' homes to verify their claimed needs. More than 80 percent of the agency's roughly 10,000 employees are currently working in the field.

For those who are able to navigate the application process, what assistance is available is paltry. FEMA grants through its main Disaster Relief Fund are capped at \$33,000, which is nowhere near sufficient to make whole people who have lost everything. The vast majority of aid recipients get far less than the maximum grant.

The main function of the program is to provide

temporary housing for disaster victims in nearby hotels or 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," a FEMA spokesman told the *Houston Press* last month. In other words, the victims of the storms must pay for their own recovery.

This week, the Senate is scheduled to vote on a \$36 billion bill that would fund relief efforts in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico, as well as the areas of California affected by the recent wildfires. However, this bill, together with the \$15 billion package passed last month, would only scratch the surface of the damage caused by some of the costliest natural disasters in American history. The economic impact from Hurricane Harvey alone is estimated to be as high as \$180 billion.

At the beginning of October, over 60,000 people remained displaced in Texas from Hurricane Harvey, according to an Associated Press report. The two main shelters in the Houston area, located in the city's main convention centers, have long since been closed down in order to reopen the facilities for convention business. More than 834,000 Texans had applied for FEMA assistance by the start of October, according to the AP, with only 298,000, or scarcely more than one-third, having received funding.

FEMA has denied outright 23 percent of 2.9 million applications for assistance from Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria, according to the *Times*. The vast majority of these denials, roughly 432,000 applications, have taken place in Florida, where, according to the newspaper, "the agency determined that many homes were not significantly damaged by the storm." In St. Lucie County, Florida, among the hardest-hit by Irma

on the Florida mainland, FEMA has given out only \$7.9 million to 6,507 households, an average of around \$1,200 per household. St. Lucie County has a population of 300,000 people.

Meanwhile, the need for food assistance remains widespread. Tens of thousands of people have flocked to assistance centers in recent weeks, where they can apply for temporary food stamps. In Florida, as the *World Socialist Web Site* reported earlier this month, more than 50,000 people lined up for food assistance at sites throughout the state, forcing closures at some facilities that were overwhelmed by demand. While only a fraction of St. Lucie residents have received assistance from FEMA, nearly a quarter of the county's population has qualified for temporary federal food assistance.

As always in natural disasters, the hardest-hit segments of the population are overwhelmingly poor and working class, with many lacking the financial resources to evacuate or living in the most vulnerable and flood-prone areas.

This experience was repeated in the Houston area, where an estimated 3,000 lined up at Deussen Park in the Texas late-summer heat to apply for \$649 in state food assistance for a four-person household. Several people in the crowd fell ill from heat exposure, according to the *Texas Tribune*, and an elderly man died of cardiac arrest shortly after arriving. The extended deadline to apply for food assistance expired last Friday.

When asked why the county did not open more facilities to handle the applications, Harris County Chief Executive Ed Emmett scapegoated the applicants themselves, citing the potential for fraud by people applying for the meager food assistance on offer. "It's become just a government giveaway as opposed to targeting people who really need help," Emmett told reporters. Government fraud investigators were reportedly on site at numerous centers monitoring the application process.



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