

A year after Hurricane Harvey hit Houston, victims still face long recovery

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In the midst of the 2018 Atlantic hurricane season, families in Texas are still struggling to recover from the calamitous floods brought by Hurricane Harvey in late August of last year.

The storm dumped more than 40 inches of rain in coastal areas over a four-day period, displacing more than 30,000 people and inflicting over \$150 billion in damage. Texas lawmakers and officials estimated the state would need \$121 billion in federal assistance to rebuild public infrastructure and housing but acknowledged the state wouldn't get anywhere near the sum required.

The federal government has virtually abandoned the victims of the storm, providing only a small fraction of the required aid. Only last month, 11 months after the storm made landfall, Congress and the Trump administration approved \$5 billion for recovery aid, little of which has actually reached struggling families.

Chris, a flood victim in Southwest Houston, had been living with her mother until their home flooded. "I've been staying with my grandma ever since Harvey," she said. "I have to work and take care of her because she's sick too."

Chris explained that her family was lucky enough to receive aid so they could rebuild their home but said recovering has still been slow. Assistance granted by state and federal agencies has been limited, so many victims have had to bear the costs themselves while still struggling with day-to-day life.

Following last year's flood, thousands of residents were forced to elevate their homes to protect against future flooding. Families often have to pay six figures to raise their homes six feet off the ground. A report by the *Texas Tribune* found that the estimated cost for elevating a home is \$75 per square foot. A 1,500 square foot home would cost \$112,500 to lift. Federal

assistance has been limited, so families are forced to take out large loans or sell their homes.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provided an additional \$1.5 billion to victims immediately following the storm, but the funds were limited to short-term needs like shelter, food and medical care. More than 890,000 families applied for FEMA disaster relief aid in the months following Harvey, but that figure does not capture the full extent of the damage.

FEMA is tasked only with immediate and short-term responses to disasters, not long-term recovery efforts, which usually take several years after major storms such as Harvey. Furthermore, no single state or federal agency keeps track of long-term efforts, meaning the true scale of recovery is virtually unknown.

Nearly \$4 billion of the granted aid has been set aside by the Army Corps of Engineers to fund various projects aimed at combating future flooding. The majority of the funding will go toward the construction of nearly 27 miles of coastal levees in southern Orange County and to shore up nearly 30 miles of existing coastal levees in Port Arthur and Freeport.

Harris County and the Houston metropolitan area, regions that experienced some of the worst flooding, received several hundred million dollars to shore up their flood control systems. A reworked flood control project on Clear Creek in southeast Harris County will receive \$295.2 million. A combined \$185 million will be allocated to widen three of Houston's major bayous.

Ron, a retired truck driver and longtime resident of Houston, was convinced the project would do little to stem flooding. "Back in the 80s the city built Beltway 8 and blocked off the creek behind our house," he said. "Ever since then it's flooded every time there's a lot of rain. Making [the bayous] wider ain't gonna solve my

problem.”

When asked about the bayou widening project, Chris agreed it would help little. “I work at a place right next to Braes Bayou, so I can see them working on it. Our store was made to be flood-proof, but it still got water in it. I don’t think it’ll help much.”

Experts also doubt the effectiveness of these projects. Part of the reason is Houston’s history of sluggish recovery efforts and failed bayou projects. Some flood control projects have been underway on a stop-and-go basis for over two decades.

The Harris County Flood Control District adopted a “pay as you go” approach to reconstruction, leaving projects delayed and incomplete. A report by the *Texas Tribune* found that Houston has yet to spend the \$51 million it received to build affordable housing after Hurricane Ike in 2008.

Climate change is a growing obstacle in mitigating Houston’s vulnerability to major floods. A recent study published in *Nature* found that the probability of storms like Harvey hitting Texas has risen from one every 100 years to one every 16 years.

Furthermore, the country’s fourth largest city is built on top of floodplains. Houston has virtually no zoning laws, allowing developers to pave over crucial acres of land that once absorbed large amounts of rainwater. This has led to an excess of floodwater during storms, which chokes the city’s vast bayou network, drainage systems and two large reservoirs. The water has nowhere to go and ultimately causes the type of catastrophic flooding so common in the area.

Victims of Hurricane Harvey are victims of American capitalism. Houston’s lax zoning laws were originally implemented to attract large petroleum companies, and relatively pitiful amounts of money are granted to recovery from natural disasters while the federal government spends hundreds of billions of dollars in preparation for war.



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