

U.S.

# Rescue Efforts Tax Houston-Area Emergency Resources

Harris County official urges residents to help rescue their neighbors; ‘we need your help’



Residents in Friendswood, Texas, used their own boats to rescue a neighbor from floodwaters on Sunday. PHOTO: STEVE GONZALES/HOUSTON CHRONICLE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

*By Arian Campo-Flores, Dan Frosch and Erin Ailworth*

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HOUSTON—As the waters rose around them, families headed to attics and rooftops, where they called for help, overwhelming emergency call centers.

Frantic friends and relatives worried about stranded loved ones took to social media to plead for assistance. The city of Houston’s Twitter feed grew into a litany of urgent appeals Sunday. “Please help! Parents and 4 children in danger of drowning,” read one post.

As first responders rushed to perform 3,000 rescues across the sprawling city—which covers an area larger than Manhattan, Chicago, Philadelphia and San Francisco combined—a chaotic picture was emerging from the floodwaters of Harvey as the region faces days of more rain and the disaster continues to unfold.

For a city that is prone to flooding, the severity and pace of the rainfall from Harvey caught even longtime residents off guard and raised questions about whether Houston should have been evacuated.

As of Sunday afternoon, the city had received nearly 6,000 calls for help, said Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner. Since Saturday night, 911 operators had received more than 56,000 calls, compared with a typical 24-hour volume of 8,000, he said.

Some personnel as well as boats and rescue vehicles that Houston officials had hoped to receive from the state didn't arrive as a result of roads being blocked by flooding, Harris County Judge Ed Emmett, the county's chief executive, said. He urged Houstonians to help rescue their neighbors. "Those of you who have boats and high-water vehicles that can be used to help people out of harm's way, we need your help," he said.

In a Houston neighborhood near Buffalo Bayou, Tim Dodson, who runs a disaster and recovery service, drove through water 3- to 4-feet deep in his large truck Sunday afternoon. He was preparing to rescue seven elderly Catholic nuns who were stuck in the Cenacle Retreat House.

A while later, Ryan Oakley arrived in the area carrying a yellow kayak. He said he was heading to a friend's house to rescue a family, including 6- and 9-year-old children, trapped on their roof. As he prepared to paddle away, he gathered a yellow rope.

"We can tie it up and support it on the roof and have the kids climb down," Mr. Oakley said. "Because there's no way to get a ladder out there."

The 911 system was overwhelmed by the volume of calls on Sunday, said Chief Darryl Coleman of the Harris County Sheriff's Office at a news briefing. Some calls were dropped and unable to connect, he said. Officials were bringing in additional operators and trying to return all dropped calls.

Sharon O'Neal struggled to get through to a 911 operator to seek help for her brother, who lives in a northern Houston neighborhood. The water in his first-floor apartment had reached his knees by Sunday morning, and he had spent the night sleeping on his dining table, she said.

Ms. O'Neal took to social media, posting on Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat that her brother needed help. "My brother is very nonchalant," she said. But "my mom and sister and I are going crazy."

Alyxandria Jordan also turned to Twitter to seek assistance for her mother and brother, who were huddled in the attic of their southwest Houston home. The water in the downstairs level had risen so high that all the furniture was floating. The pair had marked a wall in the attic and decided that if the water rose beyond that point, they would bust through the roof.

Ms. Jordan said emergency responders had told them at 2 a.m. Sunday that help was on the way but that it could take five hours to arrive. When help didn't arrive by Sunday afternoon, they waded through the neck-high water to a nearby church where they waited for a relative to retrieve them, she said.

Robert Parker, a Houston doctor and his son, Sean, were unloading a row boat in waist-high water in the Memorial Thicket area of Houston early evening Sunday to bring to a neighbor who was recovering from recent cancer surgery and was trapped at her house by floodwaters.

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HURRICANE HARVEY RELIEF EFFORTS

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To make a financial donation to Hurricane Harvey relief efforts contact these charities:

- The United Way of Greater Houston: Visit [www.unitedwayhouston.org/flood](http://www.unitedwayhouston.org/flood) or text UWFLOOD to 41444.
  - American Red Cross: Visit [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org), call 1-800-RED-CROSS or text the word Harvey to 90999 to make a \$10 donation.
  - Salvation Army: Visit [www.helpsalvationarmy.org](http://www.helpsalvationarmy.org), call 1-800-SAL-ARMY or text STORM to 51555.
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relative of the sick woman, who waded out from the house in chest-high water. The son jumped out of the boat, and pushed it through the gate and waded back to where his father was waiting.

Houston's geography and historically lax building regulations have made the city more prone to flooding, experts say. The city is low-lying, with soil composed mainly of clay, which drains slowly. Houston's rapid expansion over the years has increased the risk of flooding as wetlands and prairie have been paved over. Its drainage system is antiquated.

Flood protections have failed to keep pace with development. And the city's regulations haven't been updated in response to the types of drenching storms that Houston has seen in recent years, according to experts such as Samuel Brody, an environmental professor at Texas A&M University.

At Houston's George R. Brown Convention Center, which was turned into a giant shelter, dozens of bedraggled people exited Metro buses and headed inside Sunday afternoon, seeking safe harbor.

Some were covered in plastic garbage bags they used to shield themselves from rain. One was pushing himself on a wheelchair.

Michael Williams, 36, got there after the Metro bus he was riding got stuck in high water on Interstate 10 Saturday night, requiring all 20 passengers to be rescued. They spent the night at a

Metro bus station before being brought to the convention center.

“I guess he thought he could make it,” Mr. Williams said of the bus driver. “But the water, it got up on us.”

—*Bradley Olson, Russell Gold and Miguel Bustillo contributed to this article.*

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