

U.S.

Houston Starts to Return to Work as Focus Shifts to Recovery

Most city employees back on duty and some businesses reopen their doors while officials repeat warning of long recovery



Traffic backs up on a freeway in Houston on Tuesday. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott described the recovery from Hurricane Harvey as a “marathon, not a sprint.” PHOTO: JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

By Quint Forgey

Sept. 5, 2017 5:22 pm ET

The majority of Houston’s roughly 22,000 city employees got back to work on Tuesday as the flood-ravaged city shifted its focus to long-term recovery efforts and attempted to restore a semblance of normalcy in the wake of Hurricane Harvey.

Mayor Sylvester Turner ordered municipal staff, firefighters and police officers to return to their regular posts and partially lifted a citywide curfew from midnight to 5 a.m. that he implemented on Aug. 30, though it remains in effect in certain areas of west Houston still battling floodwaters.

The exact number of city workers back on the job Tuesday was unclear, but “most of them have returned,” said Kese Smith, a spokesman for the city. Many are reporting to their normal places of work, while others have been moved to alternate sites because of storm damage.

The city’s private sector is also beginning to re-emerge, with some retailers opening their doors for the first time since Harvey initially made landfall in Texas as a hurricane on Aug. 25. Jeannie Bollinger, president of the Houston West Chamber of Commerce, which represents 800 businesses with roughly 45,000 employees, estimated that about 60% of its members have reopened.

Houston’s Municipal Courts Department on Tuesday opened five satellite locations following extensive damage to the downtown Herbert W. Gee Municipal Courthouse. Defendants who missed their court dates during the storm could reset their cases or make court payments. Arraignments, jury service and trials remain suspended in the city.

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Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said the state is advancing from the loss-of-life stage into one of slow recovery, although he said more bodies will likely be found as floodwaters continue to recede. At least 50 fatalities have been linked to Harvey as of Tuesday.

“We all need to come to grips with the reality that the build-out is going to take a very long time,” he said. “This is a marathon, not a sprint, but we are all in this together.”

Mr. Abbott said he felt confident about the status of federal recovery funding after meeting with Sen. John Cornyn (R., Texas), Rep. Michael McCaul (R., Texas) and House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R., Calif.) on Sunday.

“Everyone in the federal government I’ve spoken to understands the magnitude of this storm,” the governor said. “It needs a Texas-sized response from Washington, D.C.”

Roughly \$550 million has already been spent on recovery efforts, Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick said Tuesday on Fox News, and roughly \$150 billion or more will be necessary to rebuild damaged infrastructure, repair flooded homes and get residents back to work.

“We are, at this point, looking at a recovery that will take weeks for some, years for others,” Mr. Patrick said.

Meanwhile, National Weather Service meteorologist Josh Lichter, based in Dickinson, Texas, in the southern part of metropolitan Houston, said most of the creeks and bayous in the area “are back near or below bankfull, so most of the roads are passable across southeast Texas.”

But the Addicks and Barker reservoirs, designed to safeguard against flooding in downtown Houston, are still overcapacity, Mr. Lichter said. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers last week began the controlled release of water from the overflowed dams, a process that has resulted in further evacuations and a flood warning for northwest Fort Bend County and west-central Harris County extending until Wednesday afternoon, and possibly longer.

“This is an ongoing process. They can’t release it all at once,” Mr. Lichter said. “They’re trying to keep the flooded area at a minimum.”

Mr. Abbott said Tuesday that the Army Corps is “scaling back” its releases of excess water from the reservoirs, though “flooding is expected to continue for a few more days before starting to recede.”

One area of the state still struggling in the storm’s aftermath is the roughly 118,000-person city of Beaumont, which has been without a clean water supply since Thursday and where search and rescue operations are ongoing. Though a city closure is still in effect, Beaumont resumed limited services Tuesday.



A home is surrounded by floodwaters on Tuesday near Beaumont, Texas. PHOTO: JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

The
Federal
Emergency
Management
Agency
Monday
evening
granted
Mr.
Abbott’s

s request for Community Disaster Loan assistance to damaged cities across the state seeking federal support to maintain their normal operating budgets and essential functions while undertaking recovery efforts.

“These loans are critical to providing cities with the resources and flexibility to recover while still providing important services to the Texans in their communities,” Mr. Abbott said in a statement.

Of the state’s 254 counties, 43 are now receiving federal assistance after Mr. Abbott on Monday requested seven more counties be added to the Federal Disaster Declaration previously granted

by FEMA. The governor last week issued a disaster proclamation to 58 counties where the storm posed an imminent threat.

—*Russell Gold contributed to this article.*

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