

U.S.

At Houston's Overcrowded Convention Center, Harvey Evacuees Face Fear and Uncertainty

About 9,100 people, nearly double the capacity, are crammed into the center, and more are waiting to get in

By Dan Frosch

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HOUSTON—Amid a sea of cots, sleeping bags and storm-weary evacuees, Joseph Shives, Alyssa King and their 11-month old daughter Aspen sat on a single air mattress, peering around Houston's George R. Brown Convention Center in bewilderment.

Less than 24 hours earlier, during Tropical Storm Harvey's onslaught, the roof of their second-story apartment caved in. Pounding rain and water poured through, sparking an electrical fire. Ms. King woke her husband, who grabbed Aspen, and they rushed out and called the fire department. Emergency workers took the family to the convention center, miles from their home in the city's southeast.

By Tuesday, Houston's convention center was crammed with 9,100 evacuees—nearly twice as many as its 5,000-person capacity.

Rows of cots filled the center's several expansive rooms. Among them were dozens of beds fashioned from cardboard boxes alongside carts overflowing with clothes, provisions and keepsakes grabbed as the floodwaters rose.

MaryJane Mudd, a spokeswoman for the Red Cross, said more people were waiting to get in and that she was concerned about "the comfort and emotional health" of the people who were already at the convention center.

"People are too tight. They're too close together. We know that," Ms. Mudd said, adding that more cots were on the way.

Mr. Shives, 33, who works at Jiffy Lube, said he had stayed awake during their first night at the shelter, keeping watch to make sure Aspen and his wife were safe because he was uneasy about the mass of strangers sleeping next to his family.

“It’s really crowded. Just crowded,” Mr. Shives said. “I think they’re a lot of people here off the streets. It makes you feel a little uncomfortable.”

Ms. King, 29, who works at a gas station, said the volunteers seemed a little overwhelmed by the thousands of people who had shown up, but were doing what they could. She expressed gratitude for the people who cheerfully brought over diapers and baby formula for Aspen.

But like her husband, Ms. King wasn’t at ease with their circumstances. On the previous night, she had stepped outside for a cigarette only to find a man vomiting next to her. Parts of the center reeked of urine and amid the throngs of families at the center and gathered outside were also mentally ill and homeless people.

Aspen, wide-eyed and laughing, seemed content to crawl around the air mattress in her onesie. But her mother still worried.

“People are doing their best. The staff and volunteers are really friendly but there’s such a need,” she said.



Rows of cots have been set up for evacuees seeking shelter at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston. PHOTO: L M OTERO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Near a line of evacuees waiting to get into the shelter, Bridget Whisenhunt, 27, skipped to the front and made her way over to a missing persons area.

Ms. Whisenhunt hadn’t been flooded out of her home but was searching for her 8-year-old daughter, who had left with Ms. Whisenhunt’s mother and grandmother from their northeast Houston home before dawn Tuesday.

Ms. Whisenhunt heard from a family member that they had been taken to the convention center. But she couldn’t reach her family by cellphone and had no confirmation they were there. She and

a friend who had accompanied her to the convention center said they needed to see them and touch them before they believed it.

After filling out a form with Houston police, Ms. Whisenhunt was told to wait for 30 minutes. She found a place to sit and fidgeted furiously.

“It’s my daughter. I don’t know where she is at. I’m shaking, I’m hurt, I’m frustrated,” she said.

Asked what she will do when she is reunited with her daughter, she said: “I’m going to hold her, kiss her, love her and cry. Then we are going to get away from here.”

Write to Dan Frosch at dan.frosch@wsj.com

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