

U.S.

In Beaumont, Residents Put Aside Their Harvey Woes to Aid Others

‘They feel obliged to give back...because they sense others have it much worse’



Volunteers helped load cars with donated supplies on Saturday outside Central Mall in Port Arthur, Texas. PHOTO: EMILY KASK/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Quint Forgey

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BEAUMONT, Texas—A chain of cars that stretched about three-quarters of a mile on S. Martin Luther King, Jr. Parkway here inched along for up to three hours over the weekend, slowly rolling into the parking lot of the Southeast Texas Food Bank.

The volunteers there—many of whom were affected by Tropical Storm Harvey’s landfall on Wednesday near southwest Louisiana—loaded up vehicles with cases of water, a box of canned food and some gummy fruit snacks for children.

The food bank opened as a water distribution center hours after the city lost access to drinking water, and since then has been serving about 1,000 cars a day, operating as a major supply point for the city. Beaumont has been without water since Thursday, but locals like 62-year-old Resa Hubert are making time to balance their grief as storm victims with their civic responsibilities as members of a hurting community.

“This area unfortunately has been hit quite a few times, so it’s something people just do,” Ms. Hubert said. “But never, never, never like this. Nothing like Harvey.”

Ms. Hubert, who works as a contract physical therapist serving special-needs children in the adjoining Orange County, has volunteered for several days at the food bank and her place of worship, Beaumont’s Wesley United Methodist Church. She has yet to hear from several friends in the city, and said she is worried for their safety.

“I just wanted to get out and do something to help,” Ms. Hubert said. “You can only watch TV for so long.”

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Beaumont is the seat of the roughly 250,000-person Jefferson County, which borders the Louisiana state line to the east and the Gulf of Mexico to the south. The city, with its refinery-based economy, attracts residents of neighboring towns such as Nederland and Port Arthur for school, shopping and work.

Port Arthur, about 20 miles south of Beaumont, was especially hard hit by the floodwaters of Harvey, which first made landfall in Texas as a hurricane on Aug. 25. While Beaumont also experienced flooding, a crippling water shortage has been the city’s most severe repercussion in the storm’s aftermath.

“We’re resilient,” said Beaumont Mayor Becky Ames. “Everyone has great attitudes about it. Everyone is helping everyone. We couldn’t be better under the circumstances.”

Officer Carol Riley, a spokeswoman for the Beaumont Police Department, said it was still unclear just how many residents of the roughly 118,000-person city were still without water as of Monday.

“There’s no way of assessing how many people are out of water because we still have 2,000 citizens whose homes are underwater,” she said. “We are cautiously optimistic in saying that everyone who is not underwater and has utilities, they should have water flowing to their house.”

But even those homes with running faucets will have to boil their water to ensure potability until it is cleared by state regulators from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Ms. Riley said.

City officials said Saturday that pumps are in place to refill water at the local water plant where it is being treated before it is pumped into the city. This is only a temporary solution until water along the Neches River recedes and two water-intake facilities can be assessed for damage, city officials said.

Officials don't know when full water services will resume, Ms. Riley said, though floodwaters have been steadily receding in the area, making Beaumont's downed pumps increasingly more accessible to city water personnel.

"We are really hopeful that everything is moving in the right direction. We're starting to have better luck," she said.

"Beaumont residents, though they're suffering a grave inconvenience, feel a sense of gratitude," said Dan Maher, the food bank's 52-year-old executive director. "They feel obliged to give back... because they sense others have it much worse."

Tightknit communities in Jefferson Parish have had to "rally among themselves" in recent days, Mr. Maher said, because Texans are having a difficult time traveling from county to county.

To do its part, Lamar University, a state school located in Beaumont that experienced flooding, has promoted storm-related service through a Harvey relief group that offers three credit hours in exchange for 40 hours of rescue and recovery volunteer work.

As many of the county lines in Texas were established along naturally occurring bayous, inter-county navigation is often facilitated by bridges and overpasses—infrastructure now damaged or underwater, Mr. Maher said.

Makenzie Sattler, 18, a freshman at Lamar, had just moved into her new dorm on campus two weeks ago, but was forced to return to her parents' home in Nederland a day later as storm warnings intensified. She spent Sunday volunteering at a Beaumont animal shelter and the food bank.

"It's really good seeing everybody unite," she said. "I haven't seen one person not jump up and do something."

Ms. Sattler works at a law firm in downtown Beaumont and hasn't been able to go to work in more than a week. Her first day of classes has been continually delayed. Friends still living in the Lamar residence halls are being shuttled to the Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas—a roughly two-and-a-half-hour drive—for food, showers and a place to sleep on the gymnasium floor.

“Resources are being used like crazy,” she said. “The grocery stores have been wiped out for about a week.”



People waited in line to buy water at the Coastal Industrial and Specialty gas welding supplies store in Beaumont, Texas, last week after the water supply to the city was shut. PHOTO: JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

About 10 miles away from the Beaumont food bank, outside Central Mall in Port Arthur, community members assembled a bazaar of blue, orange and pink canopies shading countless personal hygiene products and small mountains of bottled water from the afternoon sun.

Dozens of cars snaked through the mall parking lot, lining up to receive diapers, toothbrushes, plungers and underwear from a finely tuned assembly line of volunteers.

A handful of worshipers in the parking lot attempted to offer some spiritual relief to the storm victims idling in their vehicles. The ensemble waved multicolored flags, danced and sang along to praise songs emanating from a small speaker on the asphalt.

Ryan Polk, 36, was also at the supply stop with his fiancée, Mandy Rye, 35, serving up free plates of rice, beef and pork tacos, and pinto beans with sausage and deer meat to make the drivers' wait more bearable.

The couple, from Port Neches in Jefferson County, used a lifted truck to make rescues across Port Arthur last week, wading into waist-high water to pull storm victims from the floods. Ms. Rye's father's house in Port Arthur was destroyed.

“It's humbling, seeing what everyone else is doing,” Ms. Rye said, gesturing toward the frenzied volunteers dispensing various home essentials through car windows. “I take a lot of pride in my hometown. If you look around, you don't see the Army out here or the National Guard out here. It's just us.”

—*Joseph De Avila contributed to this article.*

Corrections & Amplifications

Volunteers helped load cars with supplies on Saturday outside Central Mall in Port Arthur, Texas. A photo caption with an earlier version of this article incorrectly called it Center Mall. (Sept. 4, 2017)

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