

U.S.

# Evacuees Flee Flooding on Texas' Eastern Coast

In Beaumont, Tropical Storm Harvey knocked out water supplies to the city of 118,000



People were waiting in line Thursday to buy water at the Coastal Industrial and Specialty gas welding supplies store after the water supply to the city of Beaumont was shut down. PHOTO: JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

*By Quint Forgey and Jon Kamp*

Aug. 31, 2017 9:03 pm ET

VIDOR, Texas—The scope of Tropical Storm Harvey’s damage continued to expand Thursday as people along Texas’ eastern coast fled their homes in scenes similar to the evacuations days earlier in Houston.

In Beaumont, record floodwaters along the Neches River knocked out water supplies to the city of 118,000, prompting a hospital evacuation. Outside the city, cars ferrying evacuees from the region blazed eastward down Interstate 10 to Louisiana, as water filling the westbound lanes threatened to wash over the concrete median.

“The barriers on the highway coming in were about to bust,” said Wendy Rendon, 51 years old, whose son, Jacob Guarneri, rescued her from her flooded, two-story house in the city of Orange on Thursday afternoon. Speaking at a church shelter in nearby Vidor, the mother of nine said all her children were safe.

Mr. Guarnere, 29, who is with the Eastgate United Pentecostal Church in Vidor, estimated about 700 evacuees have sought refuge there.

Homeland security adviser Tom Bossert said during a White House briefing that Harvey's waters affected about 100,000 homes.

"I want to put a scope and magnitude on this," he said. "That's a big number."

On the portion of Texas along the Gulf Coast and Louisiana border, Harvey dumped between 20 inches and 30 inches of rain in 24 hours, triggering major flooding and causing several deaths, including a couple crushed by a falling tree in Jasper County.

In Port Arthur, a city of about 54,000, about 3,000 people were in shelters Thursday, Mayor Derrick Freeman said. He blamed the death of an elderly man there on the storm, saying first responders couldn't reach him fast enough after a heart attack.

Floodwaters were starting to recede Thursday, he said, although water continued draining toward a pump behind his home, which remained flooded. He noticed the flooding in his home Tuesday night when a sneaker floated by in an inch of water. By early Wednesday, the water there had risen to nearly 4 feet.

The mayor, a father of five, said he was trying to find a silver lining. "We're going to strip the whole house down to the frame and we're going to get to rebuilding," he said.

To the north in Beaumont, the Neches River is expected to peak around midday Friday, according to the National Weather Service. The flooding knocked out a pumping station located along the river, cutting off the city's water supply.

"We will have to wait until the water levels from this historical flood recede before we can determine the extent of damage and make any needed repairs," the city said, telling residents to boil water until further notice.

The lack of water forced evacuations at Baptist Hospitals of Southeast Texas in Beaumont, which said in a Facebook post it would transfer patients to other acute-care facilities.

Officials at a second Beaumont hospital, which remained open with about 250 patients Thursday afternoon, pleaded with residents to seek care elsewhere unless they had a life-threatening emergency.

The hospital, owned by Christus Health, has one gallon of potable water available per person, per day and enough other supplies "for the next several days," said Paul Trevino, chief executive officer for the Christus Southeast Texas Health System.

Helicopters ferried water and nurses to Beaumont Wednesday to replenish the hospital's supplies.

Officials at the hospital were evaluating whether to transfer critically ill patients elsewhere, said Katy Kaiser, a Christus Health spokeswoman. "It's a situation that's very fluid."

Outside of Beaumont, military trucks draped in khaki canvas stopped to drop off food and water to the church in Vidor.

The damage to the region has been "surreal," said Mr. Guarneri, who is with the Eastgate United Pentecostal Church. "You ask anyone around here in the city—they've never seen anything like it in their life."

—*Melanie Evans contributed to this article.*

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*Appeared in the September 1, 2017, print edition as 'Beaumont Loses Its Water Supply.'*

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