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ICYMI: Houston Must Distribute Harvey Funds Strategically

[Houston Chronicle](#): Houston region finally poised for influx of billions in Harvey housing funds

City of Houston

Houston region finally poised for influx of billions in Harvey housing funds

By [Mike Morris](#)

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Houston-area survivors of Hurricane Harvey, some of whom have camped in their damaged homes for more than 17 months, finally are within weeks of getting some of the unprecedented \$2.3 billion in federal recovery aid now poised to pour into the region.

Houston City Council is expected to hire a group of housing repair contractors at its Wednesday meeting, the last significant step to put \$1.2 billion in recovery funds to use inside city limits. And Commissioners Court on Tuesday approved a plan that will, over the coming weeks, turn on the \$1.1 billion spigot of Department of Housing and Urban Development help for Harris County flood victims outside the city boundaries.

That help must reach storm victims faster than it did after Hurricane Ike, the region's last catastrophic storm. Congress, in approving disaster recovery funds in the weeks after Harvey, required that recipients spend the aid within two years, though it gave HUD the ability to extend that to six years, which it did, agency spokesman Brian Sullivan said.

In most contexts, of course, six years is hardly is an aggressive timeline.

Houston, Harris County and other local governments across the Texas Gulf Coast, however, do not expect to have fully spent the aid they got after Ike by the time that storm's 11th anniversary arrives this September.

Of the \$1.6 billion set aside for housing after Ike, nearly \$100 million remains unspent, or even allocated to specific projects, according to data from the Texas General Land Office. The same is true of about \$11 million of the \$1.3 billion in infrastructure funds approved after that storm. The city and county's Ike home repair programs essentially are done, and their remaining infrastructure projects — drainage improvements in Houston's Fifth Ward and Near Northside,

and street reconstructions in the Cloverleaf area near the Ship Channel — are expected to wrap up this year.

The city still has six apartment projects pending, however, three of which are early in their development; the county has two.

The Houston Housing Authority also has opened a new development in Independence Heights built with Ike funds, but has another roughly \$20 million that has yet to be allocated to specific projects.

Houston Housing Authority President Tory Gunsolley said he expects to use his remaining Ike funds by the end of the year.

The six-year Harvey deadline concerns him, he said, in part because the clock started ticking last August, when the GLO inked its deal with HUD to begin implementing the statewide recovery. Houston and Harris County sought and won more control over their funds, and have spent the last few months completing an additional round of paperwork, delaying the arrival of funding. “My main concern is how do we make sure we're spending this money as quickly as possible to meet the six-year deadline. That's the biggest challenge here,” said Daphne Lemelle, director of the county’s Community Services Department. “That would really be my goal, just making sure we're helping people as quickly as possible who have been sitting there for this long.” Tom McCasland, director of the city’s Housing and Community Development Department, said he is optimistic the deadline can be met.

“In the immediate years after Ike, the city was not in control of its destiny on those funds. It is now. That’s what is going to make the difference,” he said. “We got our allocation, we set up our programs, we decided how the money is going to get distributed.”

When Ike hit, local governments and their potential partners — developers and nonprofits — had not prioritized affordable housing enough to develop the partnerships or expertise that would have been necessary to spend the Ike funds efficiently, said Mercedes Marquez, who played a key role in the Ike recovery as HUD assistant secretary from mid-2009 to mid-2012.

“You can’t absorb that kind of capital if you don’t have large capacity in your city, in the agency and outside the agency. You have to have partners,” said Marquez, who consulted with the city early in the recovery process. “The city has embraced that they cannot succeed and serve their community without quality collaboration. That’s the key to spending money.”

One way to make the recovery more efficient is to communicate clearly with residents, said **Chrishelle Palay, executive director of the HOME Coalition**. A lack of communication after Ike led some residents to apply for every program available in the hopes of securing help, bogging down the process.

Still, **Palay said** advocates remain most concerned about how and where — not how quickly — the money will be spent.

“A lot of times there’s so much focus on hurrying up and getting the money out but it’s not in a strategic way, or the talking points represent that it will be strategic, but the actual implementation in most cases is not. We need to approach this in a very comprehensive manner. There’s great opportunity here.”

Ranjan Bhattacharjee, whose Briar Forest condo took on three feet of water during the storm, will be watching the application process closely.

The Mumbai, India native not only plans to apply for assistance — he also will shepherd fellow Houstonians through the process. He has landed a temporary job in one of the city’s housing recovery centers, having been laid off from an office furnishings company last spring, when orders tanked after Harvey and never recovered.

Bhattacharjee’s wife also lost her job after the storm shuttered the daycare center where she worked, pushing their household income below 80 percent of the citywide median, the threshold most aid recipients will need to meet.

Bhattacharjee said he hopes the funds will help him repay the friends, relatives, banks, credit unions — even a loan shark — from whom he cobbled together the funds needed to make repairs. The flooding warped his front door shut, he has been unable to replace most of his flooded appliances, and lingering moisture in the walls is making the paint peel in some spots near the water line.

“I have a positive thought that they’re going to help everybody, they’re going to help me and they’re going to help other people who need the funds,” he said. “I don’t expect it will happen overnight, but it will eventually happen and we’ll be able to repair our home; we won’t have to borrow any more money.”

Throughout the recovery, local housing officials will direct storm victims first to brief online surveys — one for city residents and one for county residents — to ensure residents do not start formal applications for programs that may not best meet their needs, triggering arduous federal requirements unnecessarily.

As of Monday, the city had collected 3,500 responses from potentially eligible families. Staff now are sifting through the filings to identify eligible families with especially low incomes or with elderly or disabled relatives or children living in the home, and plan to mail those families applications as early as this week. Repairs and checks could move by late February.

The city also is looking for families who have recovered largely with their own savings, hoping to guide them into a program that would reimburse them for a portion of their repair bills. Many of these families likely will earn more than 80 percent of the area median income which will mean only a portion of their expenses will be eligible for reimbursement.

More than 1,000 families have visited the county's online portal. Commissioners Court still must hire a vendor to conduct outreach and companies to tackle home repairs, Lemelle said, ahead of an expected program launch in mid-March.

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[https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/City-vote-on-contractors-could-start-flow-of-13571785.php?utm_campaign=CMS%20Sharing%20Tools%20\(Desktop\)&utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=referral](https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/City-vote-on-contractors-could-start-flow-of-13571785.php?utm_campaign=CMS%20Sharing%20Tools%20(Desktop)&utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=referral) via @houstonchron