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ICYMI: More than a year later, FEMA's Harvey home repair programs made few fixes

[Houston Chronicle](#): 16 months after the flood waters receded the repair programs implemented thus far – helped almost no one or funded few lasting repairs.

Palay: “FEMA’s system is not designed to serve those who need it most.

Houston Chronicle

[Mike Morris](#)

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Houston and Harris County are each about to receive more than \$1 billion in federal housing aid, the first dollars to arrive after Hurricane Harvey that will, in many cases, help ensure storm victims make a full recovery.

That is a status, 16 months after the flood waters receded, that countless Houstonians have yet to achieve, in part because the repair programs implemented thus far — funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and run by the Texas General Land Office — helped almost no one or funded few lasting repairs.

Aid meant to quickly help survivors shelter in their own homes — funding up to \$20,000 for a sink, a toilet, some countertop — reached 8,200 homes in the city and county, but the work was uneven. Residents cited nails sticking up through floors, drywall covering electrical outlets, wobbly toilets and doors that did not latch, among myriad other concerns.

Those repairs were intended to be temporary anyway, and the program included, at most, limited mold treatments. Charities helping low-income families say they repeatedly have been forced to tear out moldy cabinets and drywall installed through the program, known as PREPS (Partial Repair and Essential Power for Sheltering), and start from scratch.

“You go into a house and mold is everywhere,” said Allison Hay, executive director of Houston Habitat for Humanity, one of many local nonprofits engaged in repair work. “So, we have to rip out all that money, we have to remediate, and the homeowners are frustrated because they go backwards. That’s our tax dollars that we threw away.”

A similar quick-fix effort implemented after Baton Rouge flooded in 2016 was similarly panned: There, too, homeowners said the \$15,000 in temporary repairs were a waste of money, too meager to let them leave FEMA-funded hotel rooms or apartments to move home.

After Harvey, Texas officials said they would set clearer expectations about PREPS’ scope of work, and stressed that they also had launched a more extensive option that would fund up to \$60,000 per home for more lasting repairs.

That program, known as DALHR (Direct Assistance for Limited Home Repair), often produced better results, but it wound up benefiting just 525 families in the entire state, fewer than half of them in Houston.

About 440 homes, meanwhile, have received comparable repairs from the region’s main Harvey relief fund, which is administered by the Greater Houston Community Foundation; even more got minor fixes. Local charities will have repaired more than 2,500 homes by the end of 2019, the foundation estimates.

Chrishelle Palay, executive director of the Houston Organizing Movement for Equality, or HOME, Coalition, said it is worth celebrating the work of nonprofits and neighborhood advocates, all the more so because the absence of government aid too often has made these groups the only helpers available.

“FEMA’s system is not designed to serve those who need it most. It is better suited for folks that can navigate a very complicated system,” Palay said. “After you do cross the hurdles and are able to get the golden ticket to get some assistance, you’re met with another set of challenges of looking at how much assistance you’re going to get and if it’s really going to help you in the long run.”

FEMA spokeswoman Lauren Hersh said the PREPS and DALHR programs were intended as a last resort, and said focusing on them alone overlooks the broader \$1.2 billion in housing aid FEMA distributed to 172,600 Harvey victims. That’s an average of \$7,137 per household.

Houston expects to use just 4 percent of the \$424 million initially set aside as the high estimate for what it might spend helping distribute FEMA’s “direct temporary housing assistance” — a label that covered DALHR as well as programs that gave trailers or apartments to about 100 Houston families.

To use those funds, the city and state were dependent on referrals from FEMA. Though Harvey’s magnitude led state and federal officials to forge an atypical partnership that gave the GLO a key role in administering the first phase of the recovery, FEMA alone determined eligibility for its programs. State and city officials said they had no idea how FEMA routed aid recipients to specific programs; city housing Director Tom McCasland called it a “black box.”

Most troubling to McCasland was that FEMA appeared to be sending families to the \$20,000 program even when they appeared to qualify for the \$60,000 one. City staff sent hundreds of families’ files to state and federal officials for a second look in hopes of moving them into the more robust program, McCasland said, with some success. Then, he said, FEMA shut that down.

“It is a way of getting people to a full recovery as opposed to camping in their house — the difference for the families is significant,” McCasland said. “This was a huge wasted opportunity. It didn’t even begin to touch the need out there.”

Hersh, the FEMA spokesperson, said she was not familiar with the conversations McCasland described and declined to discuss FEMA’s eligibility process, deferring to brochures summarizing the repair programs.

In short, homeowners were eligible for PREPS if a FEMA inspector estimated their storm damage was less than \$17,000 and were eligible for DALHR if the estimate was higher than that, though repairs in the latter effort could not exceed 50 percent of the home’s value before the storm. That blocked many families in struggling neighborhoods with low property values. Many homes also suffered too much damage to be effectively patched, and must await the coming Department of Housing and Urban Development funds, which can cover complete reconstructions.

Of the \$1.17 billion in HUD funds headed to Houston, the city plans to use \$385 million to help homeowners repair or rebuild, \$200 million to build new homes and \$315 million to repair or build new apartments, along with targeting funds to small rental properties, social programs, down payment subsidies and other initiatives.

Ann Weston is curious about those HUD funds. The northeast Houston resident’s home, like those of so many of her flooded neighbors in Lakewood Park, remains in a state of disarray.

Weston used her \$13,000 in FEMA cash aid to have a contractor remove the mold, redo her floors and replace most of the sheetrock and windows, which had warped. Her contractor said he needed more to finish the house, but Weston could not pay it; she supports herself, two adult children and a grandchild on \$1,100 in monthly disability payments.

When she asked FEMA for more aid to finish the repairs, they sent a PREPS team. The workers patched her roof and installed a new bathtub, sink, toilet, a kitchen sink, cabinets and some countertop.

When members of the nonprofit West Street Recovery arrived to do finishing work, however, they spotted the hallmarks of PREPS and knew to check for mold. Now, moldy cabinets and piles of drywall sit in Weston's backyard and her kitchen again is a construction zone.

"It has to go to the dump now," Weston said. "They could have just given me the money, whatever they gave PREPS, and the same contractor that did the rest of my house, I could have had him finish."

GLO spokeswoman Brittany Eck said Weston should have called her contractor to address the mold issues under the program warranty, and also could have called the GLO's PREPS hotline.

More broadly, Eck said, it was a challenge to manage recipients' expectations about what the program could do. She noted that after previous disasters, residents with less than \$17,000 in damage received only cash, with no help from contractors.

"It's simply a sheltering program to get you back in your house so you can continue working on a full recovery," Eck said.

Even the \$60,000 repair program did not always move families within striking distance of a full recovery.

Victor and Mary Khoury live in Fleetwood, an affluent neighborhood along Buffalo Bayou a short walk from the Barker Reservoir flood gate. When the dams opened, their home was one of hundreds that went underwater for weeks.

Victor Khoury flew home from a consulting job in the United Arab Emirates before Harvey hit, and the damage was too severe for him to go back. He is now unemployed.

The couple used \$30,000 in FEMA aid to remove the mold and prepare the upstairs as a living space. DALHR workers then installed kitchen cabinets, two half-showers, three toilets, two air conditioning units and some doors and redid the floors in three rooms.

However, one of the exterior doors leaks, the kitchen cabinets are crooked and Victor Khoury said the upstairs AC unit malfunctions. The contractor allocated money to cover unanticipated electrical work without asking the couple, Khoury said, so a charity installed their kitchen countertop. The first floor remains unlivable.

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