

A year after Ike, thousands wait to go home

ONE YEAR LATER

Thousands along Gulf still wait to go home

By Mike Snyder | September 9, 2009

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Photo By Julio Cortez/Houston Chronicle

Dennis and Angela McClung have been living in this FEMA trailer in their yard while they refurbish their Shoreacres home, shown in the mirror's reflection. Photo: Julio Cortez, Houston Chronicle

Editor's note: This is the first in a series of stories marking the first anniversary of Hurricane Ike.

Hurricane Ike forced more than 85,000 Texas families out of their homes, but it posed a special dilemma for Karen Littlejohn: She bears her children at home, and she was seven months pregnant when Ike's storm surge flooded her family's house in Shoreacres.

When the Littlejohns returned to their property a few days after the storm, it was apparent that they wouldn't be able to sleep in the house, much less have a baby there.

Uncertain when the federal government might provide temporary housing, Littlejohn, 43, and her husband, **Marlon Littlejohn**, 41, borrowed money to buy a new recreational vehicle that they parked on their property. It was there that a midwife delivered their third child, **Stevie Ray**, on Nov. 21.

The Littlejohns, who lived in the RV until acquiring a FEMA mobile home in January, are among thousands of families who remain displaced a year after Ike's landfall, providing compelling evidence that recovery from this

storm is far from complete.

For months after Ike, scenes of families sleeping in their cars or in tents on their front lawns were common in coastal communities. And long after the lights came back on, debris piles were cleared away and federal disaster recovery centers closed their doors, Gulf Coast families continued to bunk on friends' couches, lease subsidized apartments or squeeze into government-supplied temporary housing.

"Because it takes so long to get federal recovery money to people and insurance companies were low-balling people for settlements in many cases and so many people were uninsured, it's not surprising that there are still thousands of people whose homes are not livable," said **Joe Higgs**, an organizer for Gulf Coast Interfaith, a nonprofit group assisting hurricane victims.

Unknown numbers

It's impossible to determine precisely how many people were forced from their homes by Ike. The **Federal Emergency Management Agency** qualified 85,245 households for its various forms of housing assistance, all of which require a determination that the applicant's home was uninhabitable. And a **Harris County Housing Authority** residential damage assessment found that 18,700 of the county's households were displaced.

Neither source, however, is comprehensive.

Harris County was one of many affected by Ike, and the FEMA figures include only people who sought government help. Countless others made their own arrangements for a place to live while they haggled with insurance adjusters and contractors to get their homes repaired.

Today, 2,180 families remain in mobile homes or other temporary housing provided by FEMA, mostly in Galveston or in the Beaumont-Port Arthur area. An additional 10,595 households are participating in the federal Disaster Housing Assistance Program, which provides temporary rent subsidies for qualified families affected by Ike.

Shoreacres, where the Littlejohns live, was among the hardest-hit communities. Ike's storm surge flooded 575 of its 691 houses.

A year later, residents who decided to stay are in various states of rebuilding, and some have moved back into their homes. The Littlejohns, however, haven't started work on their house, yet.

They're still living in their FEMA mobile home and seeking a buyer for the RV where Stevie Ray was born. To avoid the cost of demolishing their house and to prevent the environmental damage of hauling the wreckage to a landfill, they're trying to sell off scrap material on the Internet, Karen Littlejohn said.

A March 2010 deadline

A series of disputes with their windstorm and flood insurance carriers have delayed the family's efforts to rebuild the house, she said. They're worried about what they'll do after March 2010, which the city has set as a deadline for all FEMA housing to be removed.

Still, they're determined to remain on their Shoreacres property. On a recent afternoon, Karen Littlejohn explained why, as she held Stevie Ray against her hip and helped 5-year-old Jesse tie the laces of his sneakers.

"We like it here. It's a great community for the kids; they can fish and swim down there," she said, pointing toward the nearby bay front.

"It was a wonderful neighborhood, and I know it will be again," she said.

A few blocks away, Dennis and **Angela McClung** are putting the final touches on refurbishing their house. They're eager to vacate the FEMA mobile home they acquired in January, though they were grateful to get it.

The couple was staying with Angela's mother in nearby Morgan's Point when a woman from FEMA called — "out of the blue," **Dennis McClung** said — to offer the mobile home. It took a crew of six men eight hours to maneuver the 65-foot building onto the property on a wet, cold day.

Although the **McClungs** also have had insurance hassles, the work on their house has gone relatively smoothly because Dennis McClung's brother, a contractor, oversaw the repairs. Even so, the process sometimes has been frustrating, the couple said.

"Just staying focused" was difficult, Dennis McClung said. "I'd start cleaning something up and then get distracted by something else I saw. I couldn't stay on task. It was overwhelming, the amount of damage, the mud and the smell."

Role of caseworkers

This sense of being overwhelmed with multiple crises is one reason it's important for displaced families to have access to caseworkers who can help them navigate the process, said **Anna Babin**, the president and CEO of the **United Way** of Greater Houston.

Yet a federal grant to pay for case management services wasn't available until eight or nine months after Ike, and nonprofits have only recently assigned caseworkers to families, Babin said.

"Case management is critically important," Babin said. "It helps the family focus on their own personal recovery plan."

In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, the needs were so great that the United Way suspended its annual campaign for three weeks — the first time in its history it had done so — to focus all its energy on helping storm victims, Babin said.

And while Ike is little more than a distant memory for much of a nation distracted by an economic crisis, she said, it continues to affect the lives of thousands of Gulf Coast residents every day.

"The recovery process is ongoing, and it takes a lot of time," Babin said.

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