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Ike social services grants expiring, but need persists

Nonprofits helped thousands of storm victims

By Harvey Rice | September 18, 2011 | Updated: September 19, 2011 12:26am

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Photo By Brett Coomer

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Joyce Hudson - whose Hurricane Ike-damaged home Hitchcock is to be torn down and rebuilt under a federal program - doesn't have the money to move and rent a home while her house is being rebuilt. Photo: Brett Coomer / © 2011 Houston Chronicle



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GALVESTON - Hurricane Ike's storm surge swept away the Bolivar Peninsula office of a nonprofit known as Jesse Tree and left its Galveston Island office in ruins when it crashed ashore three years ago Tuesday.

Like many social service agencies in areas hit hardest by the storm, Jesse Tree, which provides counseling and other services, was very nearly put out of business. The arrival of \$93 million in social service block grants to the Houston area, despite the accompanying snarl of red tape, kept Jesse Tree and scores of other nonprofits alive and enabled them to help thousands of disaster victims.

"I could honestly say working with this federal storm funding was a nightmare, but without it we would have lost an entire infrastructure of social services," Jesse Tree Executive Director **Ted Hanley** said.

The social services disaster money runs out on Sept. 30, but the need for assistance by storm victims persists, officials said.

"I feel very badly," said **Joyce Hudson**, 66, of Hitchcock, who won't get assistance from a **Catholic Charities** program that helps find a place for low-income Ike victims to live while their homes are torn down and rebuilt under a separate federal program.

Harold Fattig, Catholic Charities southern regional director, said the Sept. 30 deadline falls before his agency can help.

Storm-related mental health issues continue to surface. Counselors at the **Family Service Center** in Galveston had 19 new patients in August, said social worker **Holly McManus**.

"What we are seeing across the board are people coping with life issues as a result of the storm," McManus said.

Nearly one-third of the 6,000 students in the Galveston school district are classified as homeless, most of them as a result of Hurricane Ike, said **Kelly Romer**, project coordinator for the school district's Project for Education of Homeless Children and Youth. The definition includes students living on the streets, in shelters or in temporary housing.

A **University of Texas Medical Branch** study of students at Galveston's **Ball High School** found that those who were on the island when the hurricane struck were more likely to engage in behaviors like drug and alcohol abuse than those who evacuated.

Need greater than ever

"It doesn't necessarily mean that those who evacuated didn't have problems," said study author **Jeff Temple**, a UTMB psychologist. "It's likely 100 percent were affected in some way. All experienced some sort of loss, some sort of trauma."

The social service grants are ending just as they are needed to help people move into rebuilt or repaired Ike-damaged homes because Galveston's \$160 million rebuilding effort is so far behind schedule, said **Joe Compian**, a leader with Gulf Coast Interfaith.

Agencies in the areas hardest hit by the hurricane managed to stretch the federal money. **St. Vincent's House in Galveston** received \$600,000 to give minor medical care to 1,000 Ike victims, but had treated 2,433 as of Aug. 31.

The Galveston-Brazoria County area received \$33 million, more than one-third of the social services disaster money given to the 12 counties in the Houston region.

Congress approved one-year social service grants in 2009, but the deadline for using the money was very close by the time it arrived. So local agencies lost nearly half the money when the deadline hit last year. A public outcry led Congress to extend the deadline another year.

The grants were for reimbursements, meaning the agencies were first required to spend money they sometimes didn't have, said **Becky Trout**, UTMB community relations executive director. The Harris and Eliza Kempner Fund and the **Moody Memorial First United Methodist Church Permanent Endowment Fund** lent agencies \$1.2 million at 1.5 percent interest, Trout said.

Trout said that after Sept. 30 agencies will have to cut services such as health screening, medical services, food distribution and assessing children for storm-related developmental problems.

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