

Ike aid delay costs some their homes in Galveston

Weary of waiting

In Galveston, red tape continues to hold up long-promised repairs. For some victims, it is costing them their homes

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Photo By Brett Coomer/Chronicle

Myron Hershel lives in a Galveston home damaged by Hurricane Ike in 2008. Hershel applied for aid from the recovery fund, but any help now would come too late.

GALVESTON — The roof still has holes. Mold grows in nooks and crannies. And there is no heating or air conditioning in **Myron Hershel's** Galveston home two years and four months after it was battered by Hurricane Ike.

About 1,500 Galveston residents are waiting for repairs or reconstruction promised over a year ago when the city received more than \$160 million in federal hurricane recovery funds. Many, like Hershel, are still living in storm-damaged homes.

Held up for more than a year by federal and state red tape, the money was finally released to the city early last year. City officials had hoped that construction and repairs would get under way last spring, but so far not a single new home has been built nor a single repair completed.

The long delay led council members to meet in a special session last week to find out why contractor Camp, Dresser and McKee, known as CDM, hasn't moved faster. The council authorized hiring a monitor, to be paid out of about \$16 million in fees expected to be paid to CDM, to supervise the company's customer services.

"I'm concerned about all the people and how long they have to wait," said **Steve Greenberg**, one of the council members who requested the meeting.

CDM has begun repairs on nine houses, but construction on the first new house might not begin for a month or more.

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Facing foreclosure

The effort is too little, too late for many, including Hershel, 57. Hershel staved off foreclosure on his damaged home once, but he became ill and the house has again been posted for foreclosure.

"They told me that would be a deal-breaker," Hershel said about his eligibility to have his home repaired.

"It's just a heartless situation," he said. "The city didn't care about us."

About 70 percent of all structures in Galveston suffered storm damage. But only about 2,000 applications for the housing repair program, intended to cover damages not covered by insurance or other aid programs, were received in a city that had about 60,000 residents before Ike struck on Sept. 13, 2008.

That number was winnowed to fewer than 1,500, and Greenberg is worried that even more applicants will be ruled ineligible.

"To me it would be a crisis if people who thought they were on the list end up not getting money," Greenberg said. "Two years later you should know who qualifies."

To meet state and federal requirements for the program, residents must present reams of documentation, said **Deborah Siefert**, CDM program manager for the disaster recovery housing program. She said many applicants lost all their documents in the storm, making an unwieldy process even more difficult.

Other requirements that drag out the process include a review by the **Texas Historical Commission** of any home built before 1972.

"We're talking about basically all the houses in Galveston," said **Joe Compian**, a board member of Gulf Coast Interfaith, which has advocated for storm victims.

The city's progress is slow in comparison to that of Galveston County, which is assisting residents rebuilding homes swept away or damaged on the Bolivar Peninsula and along Galveston Bay. The county received about \$100 million in federal housing money about the same time as the city received its money, yet it has completed 15 houses and has 26 under construction, county Housing Director **Brenda Bock** said.

"We're not near far enough," Bock said of the county's progress.

More applicants OK'd

Siefert said CDM is far ahead of the county when it comes to the number of applicants approved. She cited December figures showing 731 city applicants approved to the county's 459. Siefert predicted that the pace of city construction would quicken within the next few months.

Greenberg also is worried about storm victims who, he believes, are unfairly being disqualified because they received some insurance money. "They got insurance money and spent it to live on and now they have to repay the insurance companies," he said.

Compian said hundreds of storm victims couldn't wait more than two years without borrowing money or spending their savings to make their homes livable. Although other states like Iowa reimbursed storm victims for out-of-pocket repairs after disasters, Texas doesn't do so, he said.

Gulf Coast Interfaith obtained support for out-of-pocket reimbursements at every level of government, from local to federal, and it still hasn't happened, Compian said. "Even though we get all these statements that they support it, somebody is not pulling the trigger," he said.

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