

# Pre-Existing Conditions In a Time of Disaster

## Challenges and Opportunities Advancing an Equitable Recovery For Vulnerable Populations

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## FOREWARD

This is not your typical report. And that makes sense because it is produced by a very different kind of organization. It includes data, stories, analysis and policy recommendations, but it is different in terms of where it comes from and where it hopes to go. We are highlighting vulnerability, marginalization and discrimination, but we are also telling the stories of solidarity, resilience and hope that keep our communities going.

After our experience responding to the emergency created by Hurricane Harvey in our region— collaborating with multiple groups to coordinate rescues, distribute medical supplies, equipment and food to people with disabilities and the elderly— we saw the need to not only continue responding but to document the conditions that made some communities, individuals and families particularly vulnerable in the first place. Our resources are limited: we have one full-time staff person, a part-time executive director and a leadership team formed by immigrants with spinal cord injuries who volunteer countless hours to keep our work going. It has been difficult to balance our capacity to maintain our mission of providing medical supplies, equipment and transportation support to immigrants with disabilities with this new area of work bringing recovery aid to people affected by hurricane Harvey. In addition, we decided it was important to find the time to document and report what we learned along this journey.

In the past seventeen months we have seen suffering that seems hard to understand in a country as rich as the United States, a state as prosperous as Texas and a county and city as generous as Harris County and Houston. We have seen people living in terrible conditions not due to a lack of resources in our society, but due to the callous insensitivity of those in power at the federal and state level and the pervasive inequality in access to resources and opportunities in general and to disaster recovery resources in particular. This dynamic has been studied and reported in academic journals, and our Harvey recovery team, that now has become our Inclusive Disaster Strategies Project team, has seen it on the ground month after month while visiting African American, Latinx and Immigrant families to provide some help. It is ironic that, in these times when a cynical administration pushes anti-immigrant policies one after another—including mean spirited changes to the “public charge” rules aimed against the poor, the elderly and those with a disability—a group formed by immigrants with disabilities is proudly supporting citizens and non-citizens, not because we want to make a point, but because we recognize our shared human dignity.

This report brings attention to the fact that immigrant communities, people with disabilities, people of color and low wage workers were already living in “policy created disaster zones” generated by many

years of defunding and privatization of public services in Texas as well as policies that criminalize immigrants and people of color both at the State and Federal levels.<sup>1</sup> We denounce the way this anti-immigrant climate created by rhetoric and actions at the State and Federal governments and legislatures produced a well founded fear among immigrant families which in many cases avoided going to shelters or asking for help in order to prevent interaction with law enforcement or government agencies. Pre-existing disaster conditions such as the long history of structural racism in Texas become a persistent disaster. Once the worst part of the emergency passes, communities of color and low wage-workers have to face prejudice and discrimination even within agencies that are supposed to be focused on disaster relief.

To borrow a term from the public health world, this is an evidence based report of the “social determinants” of disaster recovery after hurricane Harvey. For the past fourteen years Living Hope has worked at the intersection of disability rights, healthcare justice and immigrant and worker rights. Our vision is to strengthen personal independence and collective autonomy with our communities in order to build an inclusive and just society where the dignity and human rights of all people are respected and supported.

Many of our members and clients and the larger communities we serve were exploited as immigrant workers or refugees. Once their bodies broke as a result of workplace accidents, crime or car accidents they became even more marginalized. Our organization has become a space where survivors of catastrophic spinal cord injuries, stroke or diabetes amputations come together to survive the trauma they have experienced. They also support one another to heal, to grow and to educate others on how to deal with the physical and emotional challenges they face and the challenges that arise from navigating institutions and systems that perpetuate exclusion and resist equity.

This report is an attempt to highlight the voices and experiences of those who are among the more marginalized in disaster recovery efforts but also looks to honor the living testimony of individuals, families and organizations working in solidarity not only to rebuild what was destroyed by hurricane Harvey but to build a better society, one where all people can have all rights and live with dignity.

Francisco Argüelles,  
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<sup>11</sup> Junia Howell, James R Elliott; Damages Done: The Longitudinal Impacts of Natural Hazards on Wealth Inequality in the United States, *Social Problems*, , spy016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spy016>

## INTRODUCTION

Hurricane Harvey brought devastation to Houston and the surrounding areas and created disaster conditions for communities already living under catastrophic conditions, many of them policy-created. Harvey was a natural phenomenon but again, policy helped create the conditions to make it worse. Many reports conclude, including the latest National Climate Assessment, that Harvey was a natural disaster made worse by climate change. An additional lens we should use to view Harvey and other disasters is how a disaster (and disaster recovery) affects certain populations. Quite simply, vulnerable communities experience disasters differently than other communities. Their experience before, during and after a disaster is worse.

Immigrants with disabilities faced an extra layer of marginalization and challenges that make access to support even harder. During and after the hurricane public health systems were overburdened, making access to health care and medication even more complicated. Immigration status, not being able to communicate due to language barriers and mobility were all major factors leading up to and during the hurricane. One year after Harvey, these challenges still exist, stronger than ever.

In this report we will look at Hurricane Harvey from several angles. We'll take a look at the results of 63 individual interviews conducted over the last year with people who experienced the hurricane. The people we spoke with are primarily low-income undocumented immigrants, people with a disability and low-income African-American people. Most of them had family members living with them. We conducted the interviews from March of 2018 to December of 2018 to examine the ongoing recovery efforts. We are hoping to continue looking at and responding to long-term recovery efforts, which many people view as at least five years.

People's names were changed to protect their privacy. We also did not do damage estimates since we do not have the capacity or knowledge to carry them out.

We also report on what we've found with recovery agencies. While there are some very good relief efforts with local organizations there are also some problems. Many of these efforts and barriers will be highlighted here.

Finally, we offer some suggestions as to how to remove some of the barriers to access to recovery funds. We suggest that the different actors take a more systemic approach by taking a look at the pre-existing conditions that create vulnerable communities.



Hurricane Harvey hit the coast of Texas on August 25, 2017. The resulting rain and flooding severely impacted Houston and the Gulf Coast region. Estimates of property damage approach \$200 billion. Still, there are other damages that are not as easily counted.

Undocumented Immigrants, immigrants with a disability, and poor people are being disproportionately affected. There are estimates of over 1.6 million immigrants in Houston and the surrounding areas. Undocumented immigrants are estimated to number 506,000. We do not have any concrete data on undocumented immigrants with a disability. In the United States in 2017, approximately 19% of the entire population had a disability. Here's something to consider: if 19% of the 506,000 undocumented immigrants in Houston and surrounding counties had a disability, we'd have 96,140 people with a disability.

Hurricane Harvey was a natural disaster. The hurricane was strong, and the flooding was unprecedented. According to the Harris County Flood Control District, "Harvey dropped upwards of 16.6 trillion gallons of water which could supply the entire US water needs for 280 days...." Harvey was a natural disaster, for many people the recovery continues to be a human-created disaster.

This story is also one of pre-existing conditions. A lack of access to adequate and safe housing, health care, transportation and jobs are all pre-existing social conditions that worsened under the effect of hurricane Harvey. Disasters have a tendency to highlight these existing inequalities. Repression by immigration officials and local law enforcement have created a well-founded climate of fear among immigrant communities that make access to shelter and recovery resources difficult. Discriminatory laws that prevent immigrants from accessing services create conditions that make the road to recovery even harder.

Hurricane Harvey also had a great impact on women since most households in our survey were led by women. In households where an occupant was in a wheelchair, women were already the primary caregivers before the hurricane. They also took care of the rest of the family.

Stress levels were extremely high. People faced difficult choices. Many families were forced to

make choices such as paying the rent or buying food. Others had fallen behind in paying their rent or utilities. It was difficult to catch up.

Even a year after Harvey, most families were living in dwellings that contained mold. Many roofs with wind and water damage were not covered by insurance. Walls and floors were especially damaged. Most trailer houses had warped floors and ceilings due to the water damage.

Many landlords did not repair the dwellings, yet they demand timely rent payments. Families were threatened if they want to break the lease to move elsewhere. If they had wheelchair ramps, many of them were destroyed or damaged by the flooding.

We are seeing that many times the communities that are hit hardest during the storm disaster have already been marginalized from society. These communities suffer from discriminatory public policies, marginalization, poverty, criminalization and racism. In addition, many poor communities are portrayed by the media as undesirable, crime-infested areas full of drugs, criminals, immigrants. Public perception, helped shaped by the media, helps perpetuate this.

In order to change preparedness, response and recovery we need a broad, long-term systemic approach in addition to immediate responses.



Over a year after Harvey and the mold keeps coming back.

## FINDINGS

- ❖ We interviewed 63 people who actually represent a total 259 people if you count those who lived in their household; 112 are undocumented and 147 have a legal form of immigration status such as permanent residency, TPS, DACA, VAWA, U Visa, asylum.
- ❖ 39 people had to move because of Harvey and 24 remained in their homes.
- ❖ All respondents and their household members reported health issues due to Harvey. Here is the breakdown of type of issue and the number of people who reported it: coughing (24), breathing problems (24), allergies (15), flu symptoms (15), trauma (40), skin problems (16), mental health (43), stress (43), sleeplessness (42), injuries (3).
- ❖ 20 people applied for FEMA help, 19 received aid but it was not enough to cover the costs of repair. 15 were not able to apply. 4 were denied.
- ❖ 17 people lost their jobs due to the flooding. 14 people reported unsafe working conditions. 4 reported not getting paid.
- ❖ 26 people had transportation problems or lost their car. 13 people reported that they did not have problems with transportation.
- ❖ Respondents reported that they needed help in the following categories:
  - Cleaning:** garage 25; kitchen 34; ceilings 53; floors; 49; walls 55; bedrooms 39;
  - Repairs:** garage 12; kitchen 31; ceilings 32; floors 31; walls 39; bedrooms 38;

## EXPERIENCES FROM THE COMMUNITY

### **LORI: THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING CASE MANAGER**

Lori's home was in the process of being repaired as a result of damage from Harvey. Like many others, the amount of funds needed to repair her home was not enough. Still, she kept trying to get her home fixed. Living Hope was able to provide Lori with a cash grant that would help her buy food and pay bills. A few months after we had spoken with her, she contacted us again and told us of a new problem. She reported that the agency that was managing her case had laid off her case manager. Since Lori was staying in an apartment paid for by disaster recovery funds managed by the agency, she was desperate. The first of the month was only days away. Her rent was coming due and she could not get anyone at the agency to answer her calls. The first of the month came and the apartment manager pressured Lori. He wanted to collect the rent.

The agency was non-responsive. No one would talk to Lori even though she had made numerous attempts to contact someone who would help her. Living Hope and West Street Recovery teamed up and committed to find Lori funds to help her pay the rent just in case the large agency denied her help. Thanks to West Street Recovery's efforts, Lori's rent was paid. Over a year later, Lori is finally back home.

### **LETICIA: MOLD REMEDIATION OR FREEING DETAINED HUSBAND**

Leticia lives with her husband and their six children. Their trailer house flooded because of Hurricane Harvey. Ten months after the hurricane the inside of her home was still covered in mold. They tried to clean it using bleach, but it kept coming back and the trailer smelled like mold. Work on the exterior had started and was mostly finished but the funds to finish the work had run out so. Inside, the ceiling and floors were still damaged. The ceiling sagged in places and the floors were warped. To make things worse, Leticia and her six children were getting sick by living with the constant presence of mold.

During our interview, Leticia asked us for advice. Should she combine the grant she had just received from us with a slightly larger grant she had just received from another agency to have mold remediation done inside her trailer? Or should she use the money for a lawyer to get her husband released from ICE? That week we visited her husband had been working in construction when during

lunch at a Whataburger he got picked up by ICE. A Whataburger employee had taken it upon himself to call ICE because the workers were speaking Spanish. We don't know where she chose to use the money. Her husband is still detained by ICE but has a court hearing this coming March.

### **RICARDO: NO TITLE, NO HELP**

It seems like the "recovery" from Harvey had passed by Ricardo and his aunt when we visited him nine months after the storm. Their house was almost gutted. Mold had made the inside of the house unlivable so much of the walls needed to be removed. Since Ricardo and his aunt did not have the title to the house, they found it difficult to apply for recovery aid. The owner, Ricardo's grandfather, was in Mexico.

Ricardo started to gut the house as best he could. Sometimes he had the help of his aunt, other times his friends helped. After six months the house had been lifted onto cinder blocks, but the house still needed a lot of work. Walls, parts of the floor and much of the ceiling were removed. There were no steps to get into the house. Inside one of the bedrooms was a mattress, a table and a small TV where Ricardo lived in order to watch over the house while he tried to rebuild it. Ricardo has made progress but there is still a lot to do. Not having the title prevented him from applying for recovery aid.

### **ROSE AND RUBY: MOVE BACK HOME SOON OR RISK LOSING YOUR DAUGHTER**

Rose is taking care of her daughter Ruby, who is in a wheelchair, and her home flooded due to Hurricane Harvey. Rose had homeowner's insurance so she received but it was not nearly enough. It did not cover even half of what was needed to repair her home. Rose was staying in a single motel room along with 5 other people because of the damage to her home. She had been trying to negotiate with her insurance company about the amount of reimbursement they were giving her but needed a bit more time. The State agency that oversaw Ruby's care was concerned about their living situation. They directed Rose to find better living conditions for her daughter or she would risk losing her.

With that ultimatum Rose accepted the insurance settlement so she could have her home cleaned and repaired. After close to a year, they eventually moved back but part of the house was still in need of repair. Luckily, through the help of friends who helped her finish repairs most of her house is repaired. Rose and her daughter are back in their home.

## **MARIA AND JOSE: ESCAPING THE FLOOD IN AN INFLATABLE POOL**

Maria and her 5 children lives in a trailer home in Northeast Houston with Jose, a member of LHWA. Maria's husband had passed away of a stroke a year ago. When the flood after the hurricane hit, she had nowhere to go. Like many immigrant communities, news of the different shelters had not reached her. She found herself with her five children and Jose, a friend of her late husband. Jose uses an electric wheelchair due to him being paralyzed from the waist down, wondering what to do and where to go.

At the suggestion of a friend, Maria used an inflatable swimming pool to transport Jose and several of her children through the flooded streets. After wading through the floodwaters carrying Jose, they eventually found a shelter. Shelters that can accommodate someone in a wheelchair are not easily available and that was the case with this one. The shelter bathroom lacked a private area where Jose could use the bathroom. Maria sought another place to go as soon as possible.

Eventually Maria returned home. She has been repairing her trailer slowly since the hurricane. Also, Jose's wheelchair ramp had been damaged in the storm. In November the wheelchair ramp Jose used was finally rebuilt due to the LHWA project. Sadly, on the day that the ramp was completed, Jose passed away. He had been sick for years. Living with a chronic illness, being a paraplegic without medical insurance and adequate health care for so long took its toll. The stress and trauma of the storm, the evacuation, and return had greatly deteriorated his health.

## **ALBERTO: WHEELCHAIR RAMP PROVIDES SAFE ACCESS TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD**

Alberto, his wife and 3-year-old daughter also lived in a trailer. After the hurricane they worked on repairing their trailer. They made repairs, cleaned out the mold. The last piece of rebuilding they needed was their wheelchair ramp. Alberto needs to use an electric wheelchair since he does not have full function of his hands. The makeshift plywood ramp he was using was unsafe. A Foundation offered funding to Living Hope to build or repair 10 wheelchair ramps. We found a contractor to build a sturdy and safe wheelchair ramp. With his new wheelchair ramp Alberto can come and go with confidence that the ramp is safe.

## **ALICIA: MOVING TO SAFETY**

Alicia lives in an apartment in East Houston. Nine months after the hurricane, her apartment was still full of mold. Her children were always coughing and got sick a lot more often than they did before the storm. They had asked for help from the landlord but were told to wait. When Alicia spoke to the landlord about moving to a cleaner, safer apartment, he threatened to take her to court because she'd be breaking the lease. He told her she could not move out. Since she was undocumented, she was afraid to do anything. She was trapped. She had to choose between her and her family's health or breaking the lease to move to a safer place and risk court and possible deportation. She chose to stay. Alicia's son was going to negotiate with the landlord. We do not know the outcome of their situation.



## BARRIERS TO RECOVERY

- ❖ Lack of affordable, safe housing is a significant and persistent problem. Houston is a city primarily of renters. Most of the respondents in this survey live in trailer houses or rent apartments. Many of the trailers we visited were still infested with mold. Even when residents had cleaned them themselves, the mold continued. Other residents felt they could not leave their apartments because they would have to break the lease. Landlords threatened to take them to court.
- ❖ Lack of shelters that are equipped for a person in a wheelchair. Many immigrants report that they did not know if a shelter was equipped for wheelchairs. Some that did go to a shelter found out that it did not meet their needs so quickly left. It's difficult when you don't have the privacy to use a catheter to go to the bathroom.
- ❖ ICE enforcement. Undocumented immigrants report that a fear of ICE influenced them as to whether to seek refuge in a shelter. In some shelters there were ICE officers so they would not stay there. Even though there was a moratorium on ICE deportations in the disaster area there were reports that people were being picked up by ICE. These reports were enough for people to not look for shelter.
- ❖ Language access was an important issue. Many of the flyers announcing where shelters and food were located were available in English only. Others reported that they could not read. Still other never received any flyers. While there was a lot of information it did not reach many communities.
- ❖ There is plenty of recovery aid but a lot of it is unknown to many people or the process can be overly burdensome. Others reported that they did not qualify for FEMA aid because of their undocumented status. Some people were afraid to apply or did not understand the process. Some large organizations were focused on helping homeowners and left out many non-homeowners. In many cases applying for relief required one to produce photos of the damage but many people lost their phone where they had their photos. Others did not feel

like being a photographer when their world was falling apart in front of them.

- ❖ Lack of communication. It's very challenging to know where to go for information. For undocumented people it becomes a question of trust. Other times the process is explained but not understood so people don't follow up. Agencies then get frustrated because applicants don't finish the application or follow up.

## CHANGES TO MAKE: THE BIG PICTURE

- ❖ Organizations, foundations and communities should work to change public policies to reduce inequities built into our society. Policies regarding housing, transportation, health, environment, and labor should always start with meeting the needs the most vulnerable first. They should incorporate people with disabilities, immigrants, poor people from the beginning and not as an afterthought. We should continue to work on eliminating policies such as SB4 and Public Charge.
- ❖ Work on changing the narrative. Organizations, foundations and communities should integrate strategic communications into their work, challenge existing negative narratives and tell new, alternative narratives. To do this we need to include our communities and amplify their voices. For the most part, there is no such thing as being the voice of the voiceless and what is needed is an increased capacity of institutions to actually listen and respond to what communities are saying. Spokesperson training, messaging, framing and communications planning and evaluation with our communities as well as with our allies is key. Establishing relationships with media professionals and outlets, using social media effectively are also recommended. Organizations with capacity in this area are already stepping up to assist those who do not have the capacity. Houston's HOME coalition is backing up organizations like Living Hope with their communications need. All organizations need to increase their investment in multilingual capacity including interpretation, translation and hiring of multilingual staff at all levels.

- ❖ Migrants, people with disabilities and poor people should be seen as being an integral part of our society. Health systems, hospitals, schools should not frame these constituencies as burdens to solve. Policymakers and elected officials should also start seeing and talking about these constituencies as important part of our society and communities. Only then can we begin to look at challenges holistically in order to solve them. A democracy that constantly marginalizes and ignores large sectors of its population is a democracy that diminishes itself.
  
- ❖ The everyday needs of people in our communities have to be met. Organizing should have a service component. They go hand and hand. Policy and legal organizations should work to support community-based organizations. Some organizations are rising to this challenge. The Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative is creating a social services database for its members to use to look for appropriate services to refer their members. This will be a huge time saver which will allow us to connect the community with agencies quicker.
  
- ❖ We should always try to fund organizations in the communities for their work. They need to stay in existence in order to continue to provide services, organize our communities. What would it look like if large agencies and foundations started investing more in helping small organizations build up their capacity so that they can continue their work on a long-term basis? Some of them are already doing this.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Immigrants and people with a disability should be involved in preparedness efforts. This involvement should be a condition for agencies to understand and adequately respond to pre-existing conditions of vulnerability that affect disaster preparedness and response and become social determinants of disaster impact and recovery. At the organizational level, they should be at the table when planning is happening. Among the ideas is community-based training for large agencies, led by marginalized communities themselves on how to communicate, understand, and better serve their communities. Too many times these large agencies train themselves without the affected communities participating.

- ❖ Small community-based organizations should have a seat at the table when it comes to planning with local and regional governments and larger NGOs. A better job should be done in terms of broadening the representation. It makes sense for government officials and large agencies to survey the area and establish relationships with organizations representing these communities. This preparedness takes time and resources.
- ❖ Set up smaller relief centers that are geographically-based and that are equipped to work with people with disabilities. This goes beyond just having a wider door to fit a wheelchair. Privacy must be thought of for people in a wheelchair. Work with people affected directly to see what the actual needs are. Recruitment in advance of first responders and volunteers that can assist people with disabilities should be part of this. For example, if a person who is quadriplegic stays in a shelter and needs to use a catheter, we should plan to meet this need in a dignified manner.
- ❖ Fund small organizations to be able to better prepare in their communities. Community-based organizations need resources to continue their work. Funding should also be provided for general operations since this is key to strengthen long-term sustainability.
- ❖ Increase the capacity to provide good, culturally-competent outreach and support in multiple languages. Consider that many people cannot read or write so other methods have to be used to guarantee their inclusion.
- ❖ Government should work with community organizations to prevent, document and eliminate discriminatory policies and practices in housing, labor, environment, schooling and access to recovery resources. Proper and equitable funding for our basic services is needed. We need to establish a real culture of equity in government and nonprofit agencies. This starts by having the capacity to do impact and outcome equity analysis of current policies and practice.
- ❖ We need better mechanisms for collaborations that requires clear and formal accountability mechanisms. The inclusion of community members in oversight efforts requires that we

need to move beyond asking for feedback from community about decisions already made to inclusion of community representation in oversight and decision-making spaces.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our disaster recovery work had been helped tremendously by others.

- ❖ West Street Recovery has provided us detailed explanations on how disaster recovery works. They have always been available for questions and consultations no matter how small they are. They have also collaborated with us on a few cases here and there.
- ❖ Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative, HILSC, Supports us in many ways. The Access to Services committee is amazing. The Humanitarian Action Plan is a detailed and thoughtful tool that will help our work. We can't wait to start using the new social service referral database. It will definitely be a useful tool for us as we will be able to quickly and more accurately be able to find resources to assist our constituents.
- ❖ The HOME Coalition is working to influence county and city policy. It's also providing supporting member organizations with technical support such as strategic communications. They also helped sponsor, along with the Sierra club, the People's tribunal on Hurricane Harvey. Check out the proceedings here: <https://houstonfloodmuseum.org/category/hurricane-harvey/peoples-tribunal/>