News
EarthBeat



Cars are submerged in floodwaters after Hurricane Beryl passed in Houston July 8, 2024. Hurricane Beryl slammed into Texas early that morning, knocking out power to nearly 3 million homes and businesses, unleashing heavy rain and causing multiple deaths it moved east and later weakened to a tropical depression, the National Hurricane Center said. (OSV News/Rich Matthews, Reuters)

James Ramos

View Author Profile

Simone Orendain

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Houston — July 10, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Catholic aid organizations in the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese confirmed they cannot get to work just yet because of the power outage that left about 2.5 million people in the dark following Hurricane Beryl's landfall July 8 that cut a damaging path through eastern Texas and left at least eight people dead.

A spokeswoman from Catholic Charities of Galveston-Houston told OSV News in an email message that while their buildings "are undamaged," their "staffing and technology infrastructure does not allow us to open and serve."

Catholic Charities spokeswoman Betsy Ballard said like the rest of the area, the archdiocese's charitable arm's phone service and internet are having issues and hindering communications between staff and clients. She said they were hopeful power would be restored within the next few days. By then they would typically be able to provide food, water, cleaning supplies and financial assistance, she said.

The Knights of Columbus in the area were also dealing with downed communications towers, according to the Knights' Texas State Council's disaster relief coordinator.

"It's early in the game and communication is really difficult right now," Knights State Emergency Response Chairman Harry Storey of Plano, Texas, told OSV News.

Storey said he reached out via email and text to Knights in east and southeast Texas and did not hear back from many of them. But the ones he was able to reach said they did not have power nor internet. He said some knights in Beaumont also did not

have power while those in Tyler and Victoria were not affected.

"By later in the week we should know a lot more what the needs are and we can organize our volunteers," he said.

He said the first order of business would be to make sure the knights, their families and widows of knights were taken care of; then they would be able to help at their own parishes and in others with possible cleanup efforts, possibly helping to move people or by offering grants.

Society of St. Vincent DePaul Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston Executive Director Ann Schorno said she was able to talk to OSV News on the phone thanks to a generator in her home.

She said the biggest challenge as of July 9 was that well over 75% of the Greater Houston area was still without power. She said the society would be collaborating with the archdiocese, Catholic Charities and other Catholic organizations with immediate attention toward "making sure everybody is safe; and getting out the resources for cleanup, cooling centers and that sort of relief to be able to help individuals right now."

Schorno said right now the Society is working on their website so they can direct clients or those in need to places where they can receive emergency services. She anticipated they would also be serving others with emergency financial assistance.

According to the power outage tracking website poweroutage.us, more than 2.1 million customers were still without power in Texas in the early afternoon July 9. In a July 8 announcement, CenterPoint Energy, Greater Houston's main energy supplier, said capacity would be restored to 1 million customers by July 10.

As Beryl moved through east Texas bound for the Midwest and Canada, weather officials issued a heat advisory for southeast Texas residents for July 8, warning of soaring temperatures reaching heat index values of 105 degrees Fahrenheit in south Houston.

Close to a foot of rain fell in just under 12 hours in parts of the Greater Houston area when Beryl pushed into the southeast Gulf Coast of Texas making landfall near Matagorda, Texas, in the early morning hours of July 8.

Throughout many Houston-area neighborhoods, the loud popping — followed immediately by flashing lights — of transformers and their fuses exploding became as common as the buzzing cicadas as Beryl's 40-80 mph winds whipped the state. With each loud crack, residents anxiously watched their lights flicker, and then suddenly turn off. By 12 p.m. that day, more than 3 million homes and businesses were without power.

Beryl, which at its peak was a Category 5 storm and the earliest in the season on record, first lashed Grenada July 1 with Category 4 hurricane winds of 150 mph and then slammed into Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula July 5 as a slightly weaker Category 2 storm.

The storm forced many businesses and parishes to cancel events or close July 7 and 8 in preparation for its Texas landfall, including a large young adult event with Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo, archbishop of Galveston-Houston.

Advertisement

In Freeport, where St. Mary Star of the Sea Parish serves many oil and gas workers employed at the nearby petrochemical refineries, residents were surprised by Beryl's intensity as a Category 1 storm. Wind gusts of 94 mph flipped 18-wheelers and RV homes, knocking down billboards and tearing apart roofs and walls.

Hunkered down in his beachside home where he rode out the storm in the bathroom with his dog Shiloh, Jimmy Beal, a 35-year resident of nearby Surfside Beach, shook his head as he told Austin's KXAN-TV that he thought he could handle the storm.

"I didn't think we were gonna make it," he said, after the storm moved north towards Houston.

"Thank God, I did a lot of praying last night, trust me. ... I've never seen the wind blow that hard here. Never," he said. "That was no 'Cat 1.' I've been through hurricanes before. I ain't never felt this house shake like that."

Beryl hit Houston just 50 days after an unexpectedly vicious wind and thunderstorm, known as a derecho, slashed Texas with 100 mph winds, shattering some 4,000 windows in downtown Houston. Tarps remaining from that mid-May storm were seen torn off open roofs by 85 mph winds and fences that were just replaced were

knocked to the ground.

In June, the Greater Houston Disaster Alliance, made up of secular and faith-based organizations, announced the release of $3 million in grants. The archdiocese's Society of St. Vincent De Paul received $100,000 from the alliance grant, while Catholic Charities Galveston-Houston received $50,000.

"Obviously everyone's got the challenge that there's a lot of donor fatigue on how frequent disasters are happening," the Society of St. Vincent De Paul's Schorno said July 9. "I have not seen anything from Disaster Alliance yet. My guess is they're in the same spot we all were. Yesterday we were just all trying to make sure we were safe."

Beryl's rains and flooding pushed bayous and rivers past their banks and into nearby streets and highways, making parts of several major Houston highways into sudden vast lakes.

Stranded drivers prompted high water rescues around the region. Drone footage showed first responders using a firetruck's ladder to reach a man trapped on his truck surrounded by rapidly moving, white-capped water on a major Houston freeway.

Beryl's arrival was the first time Houston took a direct hit from a hurricane since Hurricane Ike devastated the region when it made landfall on Galveston Island in September 2008. Ike brought a storm surge of 7-12 feet. The surge destroyed the Seafarers Center, home to one of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston's port ministries, and the historic St. Mary's Cathedral Basilica, both located just blocks from the island's popular Strand Historic District. The storm forced the archdiocese to close the Cathedral Basilica for a six-year restoration effort.

Two years after Ike, the archdiocese opened Our Lady by the Sea Chapel and Catholic Center on Crystal Beach in September 2010, which sits 18 feet above sea level, replacing a previous parish and mission that were both destroyed by Ike.

Multiple deaths have been attributed to Beryl, with at least eight in Houston. Among them was one person who drowned in his car on his way to work at the Houston Police Department; two others were killed when a tree fell on their homes, and another died in a house fire.

According to reports, Hurricane Beryl's initial massive size, followed by explosive growth to a Category 5 hurricane on July 2, made it the most powerful hurricane ever observed this early in an Atlantic hurricane season. Only one other Category 5 storm, Hurricane Emily in 2005, was known to have ever formed in July. Weather officials said "exceptionally warm ocean temperatures" were effectively rocket fuel for Beryl's rapid development.

Beryl was the second named storm of the 2024 hurricane season and had major impacts on Jamaica and the Cayman Islands as it headed to Mexico before making landfall in Texas.

Early reports were that the islands of Carriacou and Petite Martinique, which are part of Grenada, may have taken the brunt of the destruction when Beryl struck the island.

In Miami, the archdiocesan Catholic Charities agency had set up a portal for donations, while the Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services noted that it had a field person working in Grenada still assessing the scope of the damage there.

In a July 4 message of hope and resilience, Bishop Clyde Martin Harvey of St. George's, Grenada, urged Catholics to pray and come together to attend to each other's needs.

"Out of the chaos of this disaster, come, and let us walk together to new places and dreams that never were," he said.