



Galveston Faces Health Crisis as Authorities Begin Recovery from Hurricane Ike

By Greg Flakus
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The island city of Galveston and other areas along the Gulf of Mexico coast in Texas and Louisiana are struggling to begin their recovery from Hurricane Ike, which struck late last week. As VOA's Greg Flakus reports from Houston, Texas, people who remain in some stricken areas without clean water or sewage systems could face major health risks.

Texas Governor Rick Perry has called them "knuckleheads," but the several thousand people who defied evacuation orders last week and rode out the storm in the state's most vulnerable coastal communities see themselves as hardy survivors.

Officials estimate there are still between 250 and 300 people on Galveston Island in spite of dire conditions that include lack of sanitation, lack of clean water and an infestation of mosquitoes that could carry infectious diseases.

Texas State Health Commissioner Dr. David Lakey says those who stay on the island face significant health risks. "This community is challenged right now on the health and medical side," said Dr. Lakey. "We do not have an outbreak right now, but there have been a few cases. When you are unable to flush your toilet and you cannot wash your hands, when you do not have electricity to keep a refrigerator running and you cannot boil your water, that is a prime setup to have an infectious disease event."

One elderly man was evacuated from the island with mosquito bites all over his body. Since the hurricane passed through, rescue crews have assisted some 2,000 people who were stranded in the area. Officials say they will now urge everyone remaining to leave and may use legal force to remove them, if it necessary.

Galveston officials say they will allow people who evacuated before the storm to return during daylight hours to check their property, but they must leave before sunset or face a \$2,000 fine.

In other parts of the Houston metropolitan area, people are struggling with lack of electrical power and disruption of normal communications. Local power companies have brought in thousands of line crews from other states to help restore electricity, and they are making progress in some areas. Most large office buildings remain closed downtown and in other business zones. Retail stores also remain closed, except for a few operating with emergency generators and offering only limited merchandise for sale.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, is supplying personnel, food, water, materiel and financial support to the recovery effort. Working with local and state officials, FEMA has established about 60 distribution centers around the Houston area where thousands of people are now lining up for drinking water, bags of ice and other items. In the first two days after the storm, officials gave out 600,000 bags of ice and more than one million bottles of water.

Officials say it may take months to clean up and restore basic services in some devastated areas around Houston. But they say normal business should start returning to at least some parts of this fourth largest city in the United States by next week.

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