



After the rain, eviction notices for many

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September 5, 2017

From the [Houston Chronicle](#)

A week after the rain stopped, the eviction notices started showing up.

By Labor Day, managers of swamped apartment complexes across the Houston area were informing tenants that it's time to pack up their things and find another place to live.

"These first floors units will not be livable and current conditions pose a significant danger to you," warned one sympathetically worded email to residents of a complex in Fort Bend County. "We regret that this damage has occurred, and we are taking steps as rapidly as possible to repair the damage," said another notice, tacked to the inside of a door in Bellaire.

The notices, affecting hundreds of local renters, order the residents out within five days. They also signal a difficult new chapter in the story of Tropical Storm Harvey for people who do not own a home.

For residents like Sheri Ilo, whose family was evacuated by boat from the Marquis at Cinco Ranch in Katy, getting back to her apartment will be as hard as getting out. The complex sits in up to 5 feet of water. To vacate within the five-day deadline she'd need another boat - and a moving van. Then she'd have to find a new apartment in a suddenly tight market.

"Where do you expect us to go?" Ilo said Monday. "This is overwhelming to my neighbors and I. ... We all work here in Houston so we have to go back to work. Do you expect us to commute from San Antonio?"

Many management companies are refunding rent and waiving late fees. But the mass evictions like the one at Ilo's apartment complex are increasing tensions between

landlords and tenants as both grapple with flooded property, late rent payments and in some cases uncertainty over when the next



For some area apartment dwellers facing a deadline to vacate their residences, the only way to return to their flooded complex is with a boat. A Legal hotline has been set up.

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paycheck will arrive.

Landlord-tenant disputes are often the first to surface after a hurricane, said Sandra Brown, disaster manager at Lone Star Legal Aid. Brown, who says she managed more than 1,000 cases after the 2016 floods in Harris County alone, is one of many volunteer lawyers manning a legal hotline set up for Harvey victims.

"This disaster is going to daisy chain into a huge number of legal issues that are going to show up over a period of days, weeks and months," Brown said. "Right now there are going to be many landlord-tenant issues: people who don't think they should give back the security deposit for flooded properties. There will be people who will try to kick out their tenants because their brother-in-law needs some place to stay. There's going to be a severe shortage of rental space in the community."

For Ilo, a high school assistant principal who had just sold a five-bedroom home to move into Marquis at Cinco Ranch, the first battle will be getting to her apartment.

On Monday, she hitched a ride to Katy and then waded and walked more than a mile, wearing the same joggers she'd been wearing nearly a week ago when she was rescued.

The day before, residents of the 240 units were told many of their apartments were destroyed and needed to be vacated. In a letter, the property manager told residents that all of their leases were terminated. It also said rent for the last few days of August would be refunded.

The complex had previously asked everyone to sit tight and wait for updates and not worry about September's rent, according to a series of emails Ilo supplied to the Chronicle. A representative for the property manager did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Ilo, a single mother of two, considers herself better off than some storm-damaged renters facing eviction - she has a job and a place to go. But she expects to find many of the 2,500 students at Bush High School in Richmond will be dealing with their own grief and loss.

"About half of our school community live in areas that were flooded," she said. "My parents live across the street from the high school and they lost everything. The entire street outside the school is loaded with memories and furniture."

Even as some Houstonians begin the desperate search for a new home, others are struggling to pay for the ones they have. A week without paychecks has driven many apartment complexes to waive late fees on rental payments.

Feds, state can assist

The Metropolitan Organization, a community organizing group, is calling on Houston-area landlords to give renters a grace period of at least three weeks.

A lease agreement may be void if the rental is uninhabitable, but otherwise the law is clear: rent terms remain in place unless a rental company chooses to waive late fees.

Federal and state governments can also help: residents who cannot return home and live in the 32 counties declared eligible for individual assistance can qualify for help with rent. People who have been out of work due to Harvey can apply for disaster unemployment assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

In the meantime, without friends or family to turn to, many victims of apartment flooding will remain in the rental market. Anita Morton, evicted last week from her flooded first-floor apartment at a complex on Bissonnet Street, knows she was lucky to find another place to live.

She packed up her belongings from her home of 11 years, moved into a hotel and started looking for a new apartment.

"I got one in the nick of time. I think by the following day, (the complex) was 100 percent occupied," she said. "Had I waited another hour or two there probably wouldn't have been another apartment available."