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The power is back, but millions of Texans wonder what it will take to fully recover — and who will help them

By Arelis R. Hernández - Feb. 28, 2021 at 2:28 p.m. CST

AUSTIN — The plumbing in Marilu Leyva's mobile home looks as if it was mangled by a monster, and it no longer delivers water. The damage to Hussein Kamel's power-washing equipment by the freeze forced his family business to cancel jobs. The recliner where Albert Hoelscher's wife sat for days and nights in the bone-chilling cold is now empty.

Two weeks after a deadly winter storm led to a [near-collapse of the Texas power grid](#), temperatures in many cities are back in the 60s and 70s, the ice and snow have melted, and

electricity and water service have mostly been restored. But widespread damage remains: burst pipes that must be replaced; crops and [livestock that died](#) in the cold; business equipment that was destroyed; and the loss of more than 30 lives.

Millions of Texans are wondering what it will take to recover, how much it will cost and who will help them.

Large swaths of the state are still assessing the extent of the damage, and the state [legislature is holding hearings](#) to determine what went wrong and what changes are needed. [President Biden visited Houston](#) on Friday and promised that the federal government is “in for the long haul” and that the Federal Emergency Management Agency will provide millions of dollars in aid, including help for uninsured homeowners.

Since the storm hit, local elected leaders and volunteers pulled together in cities and communities across the state to fill people's immediate needs of food and water. But



Marilu Leyva and her son, Daniel, at their home in Austin on Feb. 25. The recent winter storm damaged most of the pipes in Leyva's home, leaving her without running water. (Sergio Flores for The Washington Post)

the longer-term fixes needed to make Texans whole are a window into the disparities that disasters magnify, especially in affluent cities such as Austin.

“Please don’t forget about us,” said Leyva, 40, whose beloved mobile home park is tucked between a creek and railroad tracks near million-dollar homes, trendy restaurants and a popular beer garden in a rapidly gentrifying area three miles from downtown Austin. “We still need help.” For 15 years, Leyva has saved her wages from working as a nanny to beautify the interior of the home she shares with her teenage son. But beneath the carefully laid linoleum was a deteriorating plumbing system that snapped when water froze inside the plastic pipes. Power has returned after being out for roughly five days, but she and about 50 families in her community have not had running water since the first freeze.



Leyva carries a bucket of water to her home in Austin on Feb. 25. About 50 families in her community have not had running water since the first freeze. (Sergio Flores/The Washington Post)

Those who live in this largely immigrant community rarely ask for help from outsiders. But they have had to rely uncomfortably on the kindness of friends and strangers in the short term, because the price tag for repairs is beyond what they can afford. Losing a week of work after a year of inconsistent employment is also not helping matters. Early on, neighbors trudged through the snow to a nearby brewery in search of drinking water. Others posted pleas on social media that were seen by local community organizers who brought food, bottled water and a cube of potable water to the mobile home park. Another local arranged for a food truck to cook meals for the community. The trailer park residents relish being hidden away from the bustle of the capital city to live their quiet lives. But their predicament required them to yell for help and accept the generosity.

“I don’t know how much longer we can endure this,” said Julia De Los Santos, 45, who lives in the park and posted a plea on social media.

One of the groups that has been helping is the Community Resilience Trust, which has identified about 20 privately owned mobile home parks, senior facilities and apartment complexes in need.

“They were in a deficit before the storm,” said Luis Ordaz, an organizer with the group. “This has opened our eyes to everything that is pushing these communities down. All the cracks have been exposed.”



Left: A container of clean water sits on a stack of pallets in Austin on Feb. 25. The mobile home community has no running water and is trying to conserve as much as possible. (Sergio Flores for The Washington Post)

Right: Water trickles from a fire hydrant while Austin Water Utility workers repair a broken water main on Feb. 21. (Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman/AP)

For many park residents, the most daunting challenge is getting their pipes fixed. One resident has tried to do the work himself but said stores are sold out of the parts he needs. Residents say the property manager of the community has sent a plumber to repair parts of the system, but they are responsible for their homes. Until the plumbing is restored, Leyva and others have been carrying buckets of water filled at a city tap to their homes to flush the toilet.

“Even when I lived in the Mexican countryside, we didn’t live like this,” she said.

At another mobile home park on the eastern edge of Austin, Kamel is struggling to plan out the next few weeks for his family. Business had already been slow for his pressure-washing company because of the pandemic, but the freeze has now damaged the equipment.

“We are not able to use anything. So we have like a zero income for now,” said Kamel, who must pay rent by the first week of March to avoid \$75 daily late fees. “I’m nervous. I’m sure we are not going to be able to pay on time.”

Days earlier, he nearly lost his three children to carbon monoxide poisoning after they used a charcoal stove to warm their mobile home. He said he felt like a prisoner listening to his children cry from the painful cold during their five days without power. Fear tore through Kamel and his wife after their son began vomiting and they rushed to the hospital.

The hardship reminded Kamel of his own childhood in Iraq, but he said he felt less prepared than his parents, who were accustomed to surviving. The 41-year-old has endured much in his life, but he did not expect this in Texas. The power and weather crises are over, but the consequences for his family will reverberate for weeks.

Kamel applied for individual assistance from FEMA after learning through his kids’ school about the help. Organizers from **Central Texas Interfaith** have also helped his family with immediate needs, such as food and water.

“We’ve been through similar tough times, but this time it’s different because we have kids,” Kamel said of himself and his wife. “I’m not sure what’s going to happen like next week or like 10 days from here or a month from here, you know?”

Then there are some losses that cannot ever be restored.

As the temperatures plummeted and the power went out, Albert and Rena Mae Hoelscher wrapped themselves in layers of clothing and blankets and sat shivering in their side-by-side recliners in their Austin apartment.

At night, Albert, 81, awoke every 30 minutes to see whether there was anything he could do to make his ailing wife more comfortable. Four bouts with cancer had ravaged his wife’s body to the point that Rena Mae could barely talk or eat. Though their daughter’s

home was a mile away, moving his wife in her delicate state wasn’t an option. He kept thinking the outage was temporary. And driving was dangerous. So they sat side-by-side by candlelight, waiting for the electricity to come back. The experience was worse than any in his life, including the time he spent in Vietnam during the war.

“All I was trying to do was just survive,” he said. “I was worried about her. I didn’t know if I could keep doing enough for her to keep her alive.”

He made himself sandwiches and jerry-rigged an aluminum pan and candles inside jars to warm up broth for his wife. Their daughter, Julie Valentine, could not get to her parents, either. She called the sheriff’s office to check on them and help them charge their phones. The couple warmed up a bit, but Rena Mae would not leave, and the cold persisted.

“I was wondering if I was going to find my parents dead. That was the hardest thing ever, sitting there wondering when I could finally get over there,” she said. “I cried a lot. I prayed. That’s all I could do.”

Electricity returned after three days, but the damage was done. On their second morning with power, Rena Mae was incoherent, and her husband called the paramedics. Ever fastidious about her appearance, she took time to gussy up a bit before heading alone to a hospital, which had its own problems with power and water. With her hair coifed and freshly clothed, the 83-year-old left while her husband waited by the phone. The call he dreaded came. His beloved wife had died.



Albert Hoelscher sits in his bedroom in Austin on Feb. 25. Albert’s wife, Rena Mae, died a few days after the electricity in their home was restored. “She was sick . . . but I know the weather had something to do with it,” he said. (Sergio Flores for The Washington Post)

“She was sick, . . . but I know the weather had something to do with it,” Albert said. “I never would have figured she’d be dead in three days.”

As Albert and his daughter now prepare for Rena Mae’s cremation and memorial amid a pandemic, they are convinced that the prolonged power outage robbed them of time. Time to hear her fuss over her looks once more. Time to enjoy another lazy Sunday afternoon. Time to say goodbye and learn to live without her.



Albert Hoelscher and his wife, Rena Mae, would often sit in their side-by-side recliners. During the winter storm, they wrapped themselves in layers of clothing and blankets and sat shivering in the chairs. (Sergio Flores for The Washington Post)