

# The Dallas Morning News

## No water: 15 days after losing service due to a winter storm, some in Dallas still lack working plumbing

‘Minnesotans don’t go through this’: Slow recovery from Texas storm hits Dallas renters hard

By Dianna Solis - Mar 5, 2021

Three times a day, Guillermo Granado fills big plastic containers with water from hoses near a swimming pool and hauls it to his family’s second-floor apartment, a primitive routine underscoring the scope of recovery after an epic Texas freeze.

“We’ve been without water for more than 15 days,” Granado said, explaining that the family uses the water for bathing, washing dishes and even flushing toilets.

Maria Magarin stomped on her gray carpet, to punctuate the fact that burst pipes have left her bedroom floor soggy, her apartment smelling of mold and a hallway wall so damp it bulges like a huge wet sponge. She said she feared her 6-month-old son would get sick.

“My apartment is a disaster,” the single mother of four said.

Across Dallas and Texas, the epic freeze caused incredible damage. But while most of the city is drying out and electricity and water are flowing again, in some apartment complexes where lower-income and immigrant residents live, the struggle continues. Those clobbered hardest are the working class, including immigrants all united in a struggle for help with repairs.

The storm is expected to be the costliest in Texas since Hurricane Harvey caused \$19 billion in damage, the Insurance Council of Texas has said. The city of Dallas alone has taken nearly 4,000 calls involving burst pipes for residential and commercial customers. About 1,000 calls were taken for breaks and leaks of water mains and about 400 repairs have been made on those mains, city officials said. An untold number of residential and business pipe breaks are never reported to the city.

Dallas is a city of renters. Only about four out of 10 residents own homes, compared to six out of 10 statewide, according to the Census Bureau. In fact, Dallas has the lowest homeownership



*Holding her 6-month-old Juan Jr., Maria Magarin looks at the water damage she’s sustained to her apartment in far northeast Dallas on Thursday, March 4, 2021. Magarin sustained extensive water damage and lost hot water due to the epic snowstorm that hit a few weeks ago. Magarin fears the mold growing on her wet walls will make her young sons sick and that the saggy ceiling in a walk-in closet will collapse. (Lynda M. González / Staff Photographer)*

rate of the top five most populous cities — a key metric for stability and wealth. The high level of renters could make recovery even more challenging.

In the labyrinth of apartments of the Vickery Meadow neighborhood, where half the population is foreign-born, some tenants still have no water, or only cold water. Among new fears are higher electricity bills because many are warming water on electric stoves for bathing. A few are asking for rent reductions.

The city is delivering water at night in the parking lot of the Wildflower Apartments, where there are hundreds of units, said Martha Stowe, the executive director of the Vickery Meadow Youth Development Foundation, a group that is coordinating many of the private donations.

The complex sprawls across about 10 acres and the owners are in Houston, according to property records. Management didn't respond to phone calls for comment in Dallas and Houston.

Granado, who had been fetching water from a faucet near the Wildflower swimming pool, just shrugged when asked about his new routine. The trim, muscular 63-year-old man and his wife were only visiting their daughter and her small children for a month from El Salvador when the snowstorm hit, power went out and water pipes began bursting around the neighborhood.

Stowe ticks off a list of problems there and at other locations. Her big headache was figuring out who should fix water issues, the apartment management or the city of Dallas. [Texas Baptist Men](#) even offered to place a trailer of showers run on natural gas at the complex but were turned down. When the apartment management changed their mind days later, the trailer showers and volunteers weren't available, said John Hall, a spokesman for Texas Baptist Men.

Tenants seeking rent reductions were denied the request and told that management isn't responsible for a natural disaster. "You've got to be kidding," Stowe responded when she heard.



*Maria Magarin (left) holds her 6-month-old, Juan Gonzalez Jr., while sitting in the living room of her apartment with her son, Jesus (right), 11, in far northeast Dallas. She has been sleeping and living in her living room because her bedroom and laundry room sustained extensive water damage due to the epic snowstorm that hit a few weeks ago. She said she fears the mold growing on her wet walls will make her young sons sick. (Lynda M. González / Staff Photographer)*



*Guillermo Granado carries water from hoses near the swimming pool of a Vickery Meadow apartment complex. Granado was visiting his daughter when the historic storm hit, bursting water pipes around Dallas and Texas. (Dianne Solis )*



At the city of Dallas, spokeswoman Catherine Cuellar said, “Our City Attorney’s Office and Community Prosecution units are working closely on the cases at these properties and are doing everything in their power to urge water restoration by property management and ownership.”

At apartment complexes, repair workers were hauling off wet pink insulation and damp drywall. Others nailed plywood patches to exteriors. Sandbags still sat in sidewalks, a sign they were once barriers during flooding and as snow melted. In Vickery Meadow, city of Dallas code compliance officers were working.

Clara Mendoza, another Vickery Meadow renter at a different complex, said she is exhausted by the water fight. “We have water but not hot water,” Mendoza said.

She heats the water for family baths, but now she is afraid her electricity bill will go up because her electric stove is in more use. There are eight people living in her \$1,000 a month apartment. “We have so many people, and it costs a lot to light up the stove,” she said.

Mendoza had yet to call the city of Dallas to register a complaint and said she didn’t know that such a service was even available. In the middle of pandemic and the freeze, she was just grateful for the free bottled water and warm meals at Literacy Achieves, an educational nonprofit across the street from her apartment.



*The ceiling droops, water pools on the floor, and mold grows on the walls in the bedroom and laundry room of Maria Magarin’s apartment. Magarin’s apartment sustained extensive water damage and lost hot water due to the epic snowstorm that hit a few weeks ago. By Friday, she was moving out. (Lynda M. González / Staff Photographer)*

At the [Texas Tenants Union](#), executive director Sandy Rollins said she was working nonstop on recovery issues, from forestalling evictions to finding free legal help for renters. Some renters actually had insurance, but many couldn’t afford it, Rollins said.

“It isn’t necessarily covering indefinite stays,” she said. “It is tragic and, of course, it was all preventable. Minnesotans don’t go through this.”

**Josephine Lopez-Paul, the lead organizer for Dallas Area Interfaith**, has tried to help those most in need, usually immigrant women who are single heads of households. Emergency assistance funds from the Oakland-based Family Independence Initiative obtained before the storm meant Dallas Area Interfaith was able to distribute \$500 checks in the middle of the freeze. The flow of money was held up for a few days because renters couldn’t get on computers without electricity.

“This is a disaster,” Lopez-Paul said.

By Thursday, Magarin had new hurdles. She had finally convinced management at The Everly apartment complex in North Dallas to move her from her two-bedroom apartment. The rent would stay the same at about \$900 a month. A transfer fee of \$300 was dropped at Magarin's insistence but she had to pay about \$40 for being late with the March rent.

She had four children who needed to be in a dry apartment, comfortable and stable so they could concentrate on their studies. She'd been in the management office of The Everly almost daily, asking for repairs or a change of apartments. "They thought I was crazy," she said. "I told them I was going to call the police."

Instead, a friend called 3-1-1, the city's emergency services number, for her and a complaint was filed. Magarin had the complaint number neatly written in a notebook as #2100190426 on the dining room table below a shelf loaded with Catholic religious figurines and rosaries.

A small mattress sat in the middle of the living room with a flowered blanket. Her 11-year-old son, Jesus, helped calm his baby brother, Juan. The washer and dryer were snug in a corner. The laundry nook now had floorboards that looked warped and the stucco on the ceiling was punctured from the water. The stucco bubbled and sagged.

She took Juan to the doctor, who wrote a note that read: "Please have this 6-month old patient live in a house free of roof leaks."

Mid-week, Magarin finally had hot water.

"Now, I have a lot of problems with mice. They eat all our food," she said with disgust.

And Magarin was late for one of her two jobs as a house and office cleaner. By Friday, she had partially moved to a new remodeled apartment with "no problems yet" in the same complex where plywood over the gray exterior marked spots where pipes had broken.

Most importantly, she said, her children were happy.