



THE ARCHDIOCESE OF
GALVESTON-HOUSTON

With hurricane season looming, families still suffer from winter storm

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By Jo Ann Zuñiga, Texas Catholic Herald

HOUSTON — As residents of the Gulf coast prepare for hurricane season starting June 1, many families still suffer from the February winter storm deep freeze, so faith leaders are urging Texas lawmakers to approve legislation to weatherize the power grid and provide financial relief for repairs.



With temperatures now nearing 90 degrees, memories of the frigid freeze that caused a statewide major power failure may fade, but not for those struggling to make repairs from the storm's impact.

“We’ve already spent \$5,000 out of our own pockets to get rid of mold after our pipes busted in our garage, master bathroom and closet in our home,” said Sorina Serrano, an employee and parishioner at St. Leo the Great Catholic Church in northeastern Houston.

“But the homeowners’ insurance only approved us for a check of \$6,169, and we still have holes in our sheetrock and temporary pipes where the heat or AC just goes right outside,” she said.

Plus, the insurance company notified them that it would no longer cover that area, and she cannot find another insurance company willing to insure them until the repairs are done.

Her husband, who works at the Shell Oil plant in Pasadena, did most of the home repairs himself but still needs to hire a plumber and contractor to finish the job, she said. Meanwhile, their 16-year-old daughter is trying to finish her online schooling in the damaged home.

“Plus, with the COVID-19 pandemic, my husband only worked two months in all of 2020 and just started back in December when the freeze hit in February, and he had to stop work again,” Serrano said. “We don’t know what more this hurricane season and the year will bring. We’re frustrated and tired, tired, tired.”

Serrano is one of the thousands in the state still trying to complete repairs in their homes, which is why the Network of Texas IAF Organizations – a nonpartisan coalition of mostly faith-based organizations that represents more than one million people — and The Metropolitan Organization of Houston, held a virtual press conference April 12 to support approval of State Senate Bill 3, mandating weatherization under federal energy regulation guidelines.

They are calling for the costs to be covered by power producers and energy generators as well as through the state’s \$10 billion “rainy day” fund. The bill passed in the Senate on March 29 and now moves to the House that heard testimony but has not taken a vote. It would also impose penalties for non-compliance, increase coordination among state energy regulating bodies and create an emergency alert system.

Faith organizations also called for establishing a \$2 billion fund to help families pay for home and apartment repairs and for consumer advocates to be appointed to all state energy and utility boards.

Sister Maureen O’Connell, OP, Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston director of the Secretariat for Social Concerns, said, “Never again – the damage that this past storm inflicted on families should never happen again because of lack of preparation by the state.”

“People are still suffering and can’t make repairs on their own homes. It’s criminal not to help. The community, including the State Legislature, needs to support one another,” she said.

Hilda DeLeon, who works with the Caring Hearts Ministry at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Alvin, said parishioners and other residents in the area continue to call seeking assistance in paying for rent, utility bills and home repairs.

“There is still a lot of damage to homes. People don’t have running water or toilets. They were already affected by COVID-19 and were not able to work because businesses closed down. This is just adding fuel to the fire,” she said.

Since many lost wages or jobs because of the pandemic, they remain living with mold in their homes from busted pipes and filling bathtubs with water, DeLeon described.

The ministry, with limited funds, can help each family only once every six months, she said. “This is only a temporary fix. The community’s problems are much bigger.”

State economists have estimated the total cost of the storm could top \$200 billion, more than the combined cost of damages from Hurricane Harvey in 2017 and Hurricane Ike in 2008, the state’s previous most costly storms.

Faith leaders say they pray that the 2021 hurricane season will spare those already struggling.