

Texans on Mission volunteers respond to Houston tornado

May 23, 2024

HOUSTON—Texans on Mission responded to a tornado and high winds that hit Houston May 16.

The winds caused damage estimated to cover about 500 square miles, according to Texas Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster.



Texans on Mission volunteers book beans that are distributed to thousands of Houstonians affected by the May 16 tornado that caused damage to approximately 500 square miles of the area and shut down power for a large part of the city. (Photo / Russ Dilday / Texans on Mission)

Texans on Mission, formerly known as Texas Baptist Men, sent disaster relief units to Houston, including assessors, a command center, shower/laundry, chainsaw, chaplains, mass feeding, box, security and electronic support. The teams are serving thousands of people daily in

Houston and nearby communities.

The Houston disaster is the latest in a series of tragedies the organization has responded to this spring.

“We’ve been responding to a multiple-front set of challenges,” said Mickey Lenamon, chief executive officer. “In just the past two weeks, we’ve responded to flooding in North Houston and Conroe, flooding in Rising Star, and high winds and a tornado in San Marcos. Our volunteers have been faithful in responding across our state with help, hope and healing.”

Immediate response



Members of the Texans on Mission chainsaw and heavy equipment team from Kingsland Baptist Church in Katy remove downed trees and limbs from a home. (Photo / Russ Dilday / Texans on Mission)

Texans on Mission incident commander Jim Lawton said the organization’s response was “immediate.”

“Assessors began surveying damage and starting work orders in affected neighborhoods only two hours after” the Thursday evening storm blew

through Northwest Houston and ranged southeast, killing at least four people, said Lawton, a member of First Baptist Church of Waxahachie.

“By Saturday, our local chainsaw team at Kingsland Baptist Church in Katy already was on the ground removing fallen trees from homes and cars,” he continued.

One of the first responders to the storm was Marcell Hunt, team lead for the Kingsland chainsaw and heavy equipment team and overall coordinator for all Texans on Mission teams at Kingsland Church.

“As soon as I got a phone call that there were trees down in the Spring Branch area, I immediately got in my car and started driving around to see what I could see,” Hunt said. “Then I spent all day Friday driving up and down streets and talking to homeowners that looked like they needed help and picking up work orders.

“We mobilized Saturday to do the first job, where there were two 100-foot-tall pine trees, probably 30 inches in diameter, across four cars.”

Hunt said the damage is broad across many area communities. His team worked Wednesday in West Houston, while the previous day they completed work orders in Montgomery.

‘Truly a blessing to all of us’



Members of the Texans on Mission chainsaw and heavy equipment team from Kingsland Baptist Church in Katy remove downed trees and limbs from the home of Herta Strobel. (Photo / Russ Dilday / Texans on Mission)

On Wednesday, his group removed trees and large limbs with chainsaws, a basket lift and a heavy skid steer from Herta Strobel's home. Strobel, who's lived in her house 57 years, said the storm was one of the most violent she's seen.

"I have a barometer, and it was set on the lowest pressure we ever had, even when a hurricane came through, and I thought, 'My goodness,'" Strobel said. "I was at evening supper eating a bowl of cereal—I eat real light for supper—and the winds ... the trees were going in circles, not swaying.

"And then these three or four big pine branches came falling down. I was shaken—badly, badly shaken. It took me three days to calm down. It's a horrible experience."

When Texans on Mission assessors knocked on her door "and said they would do volunteer work, I couldn't believe my ears," she said. "But I think

they have done a wonderful, wonderful service, God's blessings, and I'm just so thankful that they are here to help us all."



Texans on Mission 's Deep East Texas chainsaw team removed a large pine tree from a home owned by Bonnie Murdock. (Photo / Russ Dilday / Texans on Mission)

Further southeast, homeowner Bonnie Murdock watched Texans on Mission's Deep East Texas chainsaw team remove a pine tree that crashed into the roof of her mother's former home, which she rents to her nephews.

"My nephews said it was something like they'd never experienced before" as the nearly 40-inch-diameter tree fell over the home, she said.

"They said it sounded like a railroad. They just didn't know what the severity was until after it was over, and they came out and looked. Thank God they made it outside."

Looking over the team that spent two days removing the massive tree from the roof, Murdock reflected on the volunteers' efforts

"Y'all are truly a blessing to all of us," she said. "And everybody that I have met so far, they are so sweet and generous and courteous."

Feeding thousands

At First Metropolitan Church of Houston, Texans on Mission volunteers were providing a very different response—mass feeding thousands of Houstonians affected by storm-related power outages.

Mass feeding team leader Gary Finley said his 28-member volunteer team “will have served 25,000 meals” by the end of Wednesday. “I don’t know how long we will be needed, but we will continue ministering here until the need is met.”



Gary Finley, Texans on Mission mass feeding team leader, introduces Bishop John Ogletree of First Metropolitan Church to Texans on Mission mass feeding efforts. Almost 30 Texans on Mission volunteers prepared thousands of meals for Houstonians affected by the May 16 tornado. The team provided meals from the parking lot of First Metropolitan Church. (Photo / Russ Dilday / Texans on Mission)

Finley, a member of Grace Bible Church in LaVernia, and his team are cooking under two large tents set up in First Metropolitan's parking lot and bunking in a few of its education spaces.

Beginning each day at 4 a.m., members cook and pack meals into insulated tubs, or Cambros, which are then loaded onto Emergency Relief Vehicles operated by the American Red Cross and Salvation Army for distribution.

Bishop John Ogletree of First Metropolitan Church met with volunteers Monday morning, telling the team they were "doing phenomenal work for disaster relief. Bless you and thank you."

Meals also were distributed by LifeBrook Church in Houston. Lead Pastor Zach Brackett and Discipleship Pastor Reid Felchak picked up meals in a church van each day to distribute in their community.

Brackett said the meals are "headed to the Lazybrook/Timbergrove community which ... was one of the harder-hit areas around here.

"We just want to go out and express the love of Christ in a very tangible way" through the food, he added. "We get to serve our community and let them know that LifeBrook Church loves them."

The church also has fielded teams for debris cleanup, he said, "and so this is another way for us to serve the community—to feed them."

Brackett said many area residents remain without electricity. "There are trees everywhere—some on houses but a lot of trees and debris on power lines. It looked sort of like ... a war zone. No power."

The meal provision by Texans on Mission "means that we're able to go focus on interacting and engaging with the people," he said.

"You know, we don't have the bandwidth to prepare this amount of food this quickly, but having Texans on Mission prepare that food for us, it

allows us to go love and serve our community well and to care for them.”

‘Telling others about Jesus’

Jim Lawton reminded volunteers Monday at a team meeting that the chainsaw, heavy equipment and mass feeding efforts are “only side jobs for what we’re here to do: Telling others about Jesus.”

Volunteer chaplains were deployed with the teams, working with assessors to spread the gospel and offer comfort to stricken families. Chaplain Leslie Burch, a member of First Baptist Church of Orange, was able to tell the story of Christ and offer support to Mark Conover.



Texans on Mission volunteer chaplain Leslie Burch, a member of First Baptist Church of Orange, shares the Gospel with Mark Conover. (Photo / Russ Dilday / Texans on Mission)

Conover, who lives with his mother, was released from prison in Huntsville a little more than three months ago. It's the latest in a string of incarcerations for the 53-year-old, who said he's been in trouble with the law since he was 12.

The mother and son had multiple trees down in their yard, including one that fell over their garage.

Conover said when he saw Burch and assessor Darrell Siems approach the house, he was wary and wouldn't come out to meet them initially.

"At first, I thought they were the tree company that we called yesterday, but (my neighbor) called me and said, 'Hey, I'm outside (with the Texans on Mission team),' and that got me to go outside.

"I was like, 'What are these people doing here, man?' I thought, sure, we need help, but these people ain't going to help us."

But when the pair told him their mission of removing the debris in their yard for free, "I couldn't believe it," he said.

"I thought Leslie was a very cool person. She helped me to slow down and look at things in a positive way," he said, adding that he had been struggling recently with his past.

"You know what she said to me?" he asked. "She said, 'That's not your identity to God. You have got to re-identify yourself and learn what God thinks about you.

"Because, he thinks about you. He thinks about all of us every single day," Conover said, recalling Burch's words of encouragement.