

After Harvey, immigrants in La Grange turn to each other for help

By Perla Arellano - ¡Ahora Sí!

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LA GRANGE — A few days after Hurricane Harvey flooded entire neighborhoods in this city, the Martínez family was looking for anything they could salvage among the piles of debris inside their ruined trailer home when two H-E-B employees came up to Omar Martínez to offer their help.

They were both accompanied by a familiar face, one of Martínez's neighbors, Edna Palacios, who had also lost her home and had offered to help the H-E-B employees as an interpreter while they were in Country Way Village, a trailer park community that had been submerged in floodwaters just three days prior.

Palacios explained to Martínez, whose understanding of English was limited, that the H-E-B employees were handing out \$25 gift cards to buy groceries and were also helping with any heavy lifting.

"We need to stay united," Palacios said about interpreting for her neighbors. "Because, if not, nobody else is going to help us."



JAY JANNER/AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Trailers and a car are damaged in the Country Way Village Mobile Home Park in La Grange after Hurricane Harvey

The residents of Country Way Village, a five-minute drive from the Colorado River that crested and flooded them after the storm, are going through some of the same hardships other Harvey victims across Texas are facing: the temporary or permanent loss of a home and, in some cases, having nowhere to go. But many of them speak little English and might not have legal permission to live in the country, creating additional problems that have made it more difficult to obtain information from officials and to apply for relief services.

And when there isn't a qualified interpreter around or when vital information is only available in English, then translating has often fallen on the shoulders of residents' children and neighbors like Palacios.

It's a job that's kept them busy. Country Way Village became flooded on Aug. 28, but even though residents were allowed to re-enter their homes three days later, almost a week passed before Palacios was able to inspect the inside of her house because she spent so much time helping others.

“The ones that are interpreting are the same ones that live here,” Palacios said. “We aren’t able to focus on our own problems because we are busy helping out our neighbors.”

Neighbors’ keeper

On Aug. 27, about 300 residents of Fayette County living along the Colorado River were evacuated, including the Country Way Village community. The day after their evacuation, residents saw how their trailer homes had been just a few inches from being completely submerged by floodwaters. They saw how the river’s current had uprooted their homes from their original platforms and left them either resting on one side or crashed against each other. Some trailer homes’ exterior shell was stripped away, exposing the remnants left behind.

The day of the flood, Palacios created a Facebook page with information in Spanish to inform people when and where agencies such as the Mexican Consulate or the Federal Emergency Management Agency were going to visit. When La Grange officials were unable to give them specifics on when they would be allowed back into their homes, Palacios said she and her neighbors took matters into their own hands.

Facing rumors about the possible demolition of their homes and unable to obtain clarification from city officials, Palacios spoke to the media in English while one of the members of the Martínez family spoke to them in Spanish.

“In two days, the work of 15 years is gone,” Brenda Martínez said, with tears in her eyes, to reporters from Spanish-language TV network Univision. “How do they expect us not to feel desperate if they don’t tell us anything?”

They were allowed to enter their houses the next day.

Palacios said the biggest problem for the community continues to be finding help to start over again. And getting help is difficult when one is afraid to ask for it.

Immigration fears

When Harvey struck Texas, immigration activists said that fears over Senate Bill 4, the ban on “sanctuary cities,” and the possibility of facing questions about their immigration status in shelters discouraged many people living in the U.S. without authorization to go out and seek help.

“Many people did not come to the shelter for fear that (they) would be reported to immigration authorities,” said Carlos Carreón, pastor of First Baptist Church of La Grange, which sheltered a dozen people during the flooding.

Carreón, who also served as an interpreter during the crisis, said he had heard of several immigrant families who went to relatives’ homes instead of shelters while others opted to stay in their vehicles during the storm.

Chris Little, pastor of Second Baptist Church, which also served as a shelter, said that one of the tactics his staff and volunteers used was not to wear uniforms so as not to alarm unauthorized immigrants seeking shelter.

“We only want to know their name to know who they are,” Little said. “We want to love on them by name, not nationality or legal status.”

Many of the families who have lost their homes will now have to prepare for what he described as a “long-term temporary state of living” — in other words, he said, they are going to be mobile until they have a new place to stay.

Indeed, finding a new home is the biggest concern for these families, Palacios said.

“They all tell me, ‘We do not want any more clothes, we do not want any more food; we want them to help us find a place to live,’” she said. “We are all hoping that FEMA will give us a positive response.”

Children also step up

When talking to agencies like FEMA, immigrant’s children also end up playing the crucial role of interpreting for their families. For example, when FEMA came to La Grange, 15-year-old Jacqueline Soto ended up interpreting for three families, including her uncle’s, before she and her mother could speak to FEMA officials.

People without Social Security numbers also often submit their U.S.-born child’s information to apply to the FEMA assistance program.

But, Palacios points out, not all families have at least one relative with a Social Security number. This is where the resources of nonprofit organizations and the Mexican Consulate come in. Carlos González Gutiérrez, the consul general of Mexico in Austin, said the consulate was offering assistance to Mexican citizens affected by Harvey, including providing identifications, locating lost family members, offering financial



assistance, and even “repatriation assistance (to Mexico) in case they wish to move back.”

But returning to Mexico isn’t an option for many like Luz Maria Don Juan, a native of Guanajuato and a resident who lost her trailer home in Country Way Village due to the flooding.

“Being there is the same as being here,” she said, because she doesn’t own a home in either country. But at least, she added, “there is work here.”