



## ISSUE BRIEF:

# Supporting Students and Schools in Times of Disaster

### Introduction

Although disaster philanthropy is not the explicit focus of many funders, catastrophic events can leave grantmaking organizations looking for mission-aligned ways to support impacted communities. Hurricane Harvey was one such event, disrupting the lives and learning of thousands of students when it tore through Texas in August 2017. Government agencies, nonprofits, funders, and citizens acted quickly to meet the immediate needs of the region, but long-term recovery will require sustained focus and resources. This brief provides 1) an update on Harvey recovery efforts, particularly regarding K-12 and postsecondary institutions, and 2) recommendations for education-focused philanthropic organizations in times of disaster.

Hurricane Harvey made landfall on San Jose Island, Texas, late at night on August 26, 2017. Over the next several days, the Category 4 hurricane drenched the Texas coast with 19 trillion gallons of rain and battered homes and businesses with sustained winds of 130 mph.<sup>1</sup> The storm ruined 1 million cars; forced 780,000 residents to evacuate their homes; flooded 80,000 houses with knee-deep water; knocked out power, water, and wastewater systems in dozens of communities; and took the lives of 82 people.<sup>2</sup> Texas Governor Greg Abbott estimated the state will need a staggering \$180 billion in federal aid alone to recover from the disaster.<sup>3</sup>

The philanthropic community responded quickly to Harvey; as of late December, nonprofits throughout Texas and beyond had collected nearly \$1 billion to provide Harvey survivors with cash, food, temporary housing, and other necessities.<sup>4</sup> Meeting those immediate needs is just the beginning, though; restoring homes, schools, businesses, health, and infrastructure will require much more time and support.

### Harvey's Impact: Homes & Health

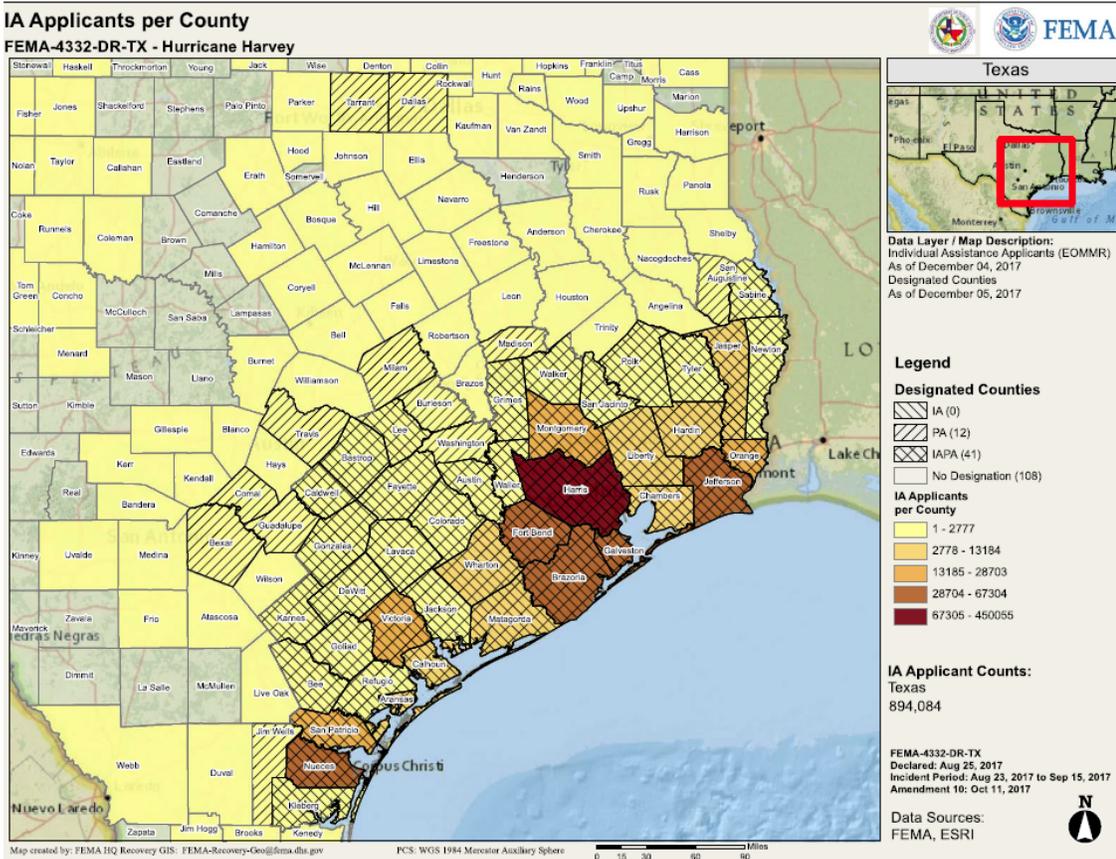
To understand the impact of Harvey on students and schools, we must first understand its impact on their homes and health.<sup>5</sup> Forty-five Texas counties were declared eligible for federal emergency aid due to Hurricane Harvey (see Figure 1 on p. 2). Within these counties, 891,328 households have applied to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for assistance, with the greatest number of applicants concentrated in and around Houston, Corpus Christi, and Beaumont. An additional 1,921 households outside of the disaster zone have applied for assistance. Note that each household may contain multiple individuals, and that these estimates do not include households that may need assistance but have not applied for it.

As of early December, FEMA had verified about \$2.36 billion in damage to individual homes and awarded assistance to cover about half of that cost, leaving \$1.19 billion in unmet needs. Although FEMA has granted a large total amount of aid, the average housing assistance award is only \$6,898 per household, and the maximum award available is \$33,300. Families whose homes need major repairs or were destroyed will have to find additional sources of funding to secure safe, permanent housing. In the meantime, more than 36,000 Texans are staying in hotels across the country, and many more are temporarily housed with friends or relatives.

Public health is a major concern in the aftermath of Harvey, as well. Mold and mildew inevitably follow flooding, creating a heightened risk of respiratory ailments and exacerbating existing illnesses. The destruction and repair of older homes may expose asbestos, lead paint, and other hazards. Accumulating debris increases the risk of



Figure 1. Disaster-Designated Counties and Applicants for Individual Assistance (IA)



Source: Hurricane Harvey Funders’ Call, December 13, 2017 (see endnote 5). Full slide deck available upon request.

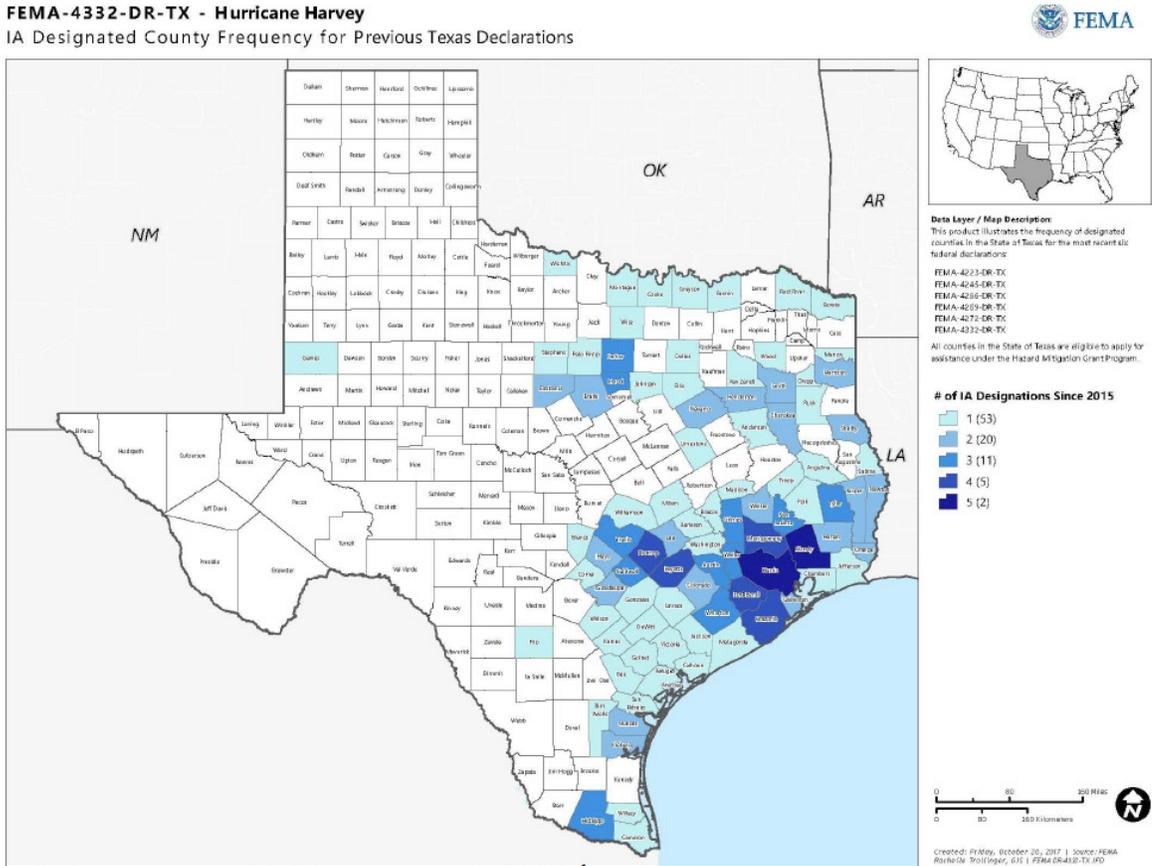
physical injury and decreases environmental quality. Meanwhile, behavioral health problems spike after disasters, complicating recovery. The prolonged stress of loss and upheaval makes it difficult for people to make decisions and navigate complex systems to get the help they need, and it increases the risk of self-harm, substance abuse, depression, abuse, and suicide.

It is also important to note that for some Texans, Harvey represents the latest in a series of traumatic events. Seven of the counties hit by Harvey have received a federal disaster designation as many as four or five times since 2015 due to other severe storms and floods (see Figure 2, p. 3). It is likely many residents of these counties were still trying to recover from these previous catastrophes even as Harvey made landfall.

Finally, natural disasters magnify and complicate the personal crises that are common to everyday life, such as financial problems, drug addiction, undocumented status, illness, divorce, and the death of a loved one. In short, the Texans who most needed support before Harvey are the ones who need the most support after Harvey.



Figure 2. Frequency of Disaster Declarations Since 2015 by County



Source: Hurricane Harvey Funders’ Call, December 13, 2017 (see endnote 5). Full slide deck available upon request.

### Harvey’s Impact: Students & Schools

Texas K-12 schools provide much more than academic instruction; they minister to children’s social, health, and emotional needs and serve as a resource for the entire community. Harvey tested the limits of these crucial institutions and the people they serve. More than 1.9 million students attend public K-12 schools in the counties included in Governor Abbott’s disaster proclamation, and 1.4 million of them were directly impacted by Harvey.<sup>6</sup> The housing and health problems described in the previous section no doubt affect many of these children. After Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, 20% of displaced school-aged children missed more than ten school days each month or were not enrolled at all; their families moved an average of 3.5 times in the five months immediately following the storm.<sup>7</sup> Children displaced by Harvey may face similar losses of educational opportunity if their families do not obtain stable housing.

The storm generated other education-related concerns. Students who moved to other schools due to the storm face an increased risk of bullying and feelings of isolation.<sup>8</sup> The hurricane cut short learning time for all students, whether displaced or not: schools within 123 districts closed for one to two weeks, and 18 closed for three weeks or more.<sup>9</sup> Even with school back in session, the loss of instructional materials and technology limited teachers’ options for



delivering high-quality lessons. Finally, faculty and staff are not immune to the impact of Harvey themselves; in districts where employees had to miss work to tend to personal needs or who were displaced altogether, keeping classrooms consistently staffed with qualified personnel is a struggle.

Institutions of higher education face similar challenges, with an added layer of complexity: postsecondary students have a choice about whether to continue their education after experiencing a disaster. Unstable housing and finances, psychological trauma, and other complications can prevent students from persevering in their postsecondary pathways because of storms like Harvey. For example, one New Orleans community college system lost more than 40% of its enrollment in the semester after Hurricane Katrina.<sup>10</sup>

The Harvey disaster zone includes 34 colleges and universities.<sup>11</sup> Approximately 454,580 Texas college students reside in disaster-declared counties, and another 100,245 students count a disaster-declared county as home.<sup>12</sup> At the 13 institutions in the disaster zone who responded to a recent THECB survey, an estimated 2,134 students did not return to class after the storm.<sup>13</sup> Some students witnessed the destruction of their homes and were left with nothing but the clothes they were wearing and a few personal effects.<sup>14</sup> Others were torn between home and school, knowing they should be on campus for the start of the semester but needing to help their families clean up and seek aid.<sup>15</sup> For many students, Harvey caused academic disruption and psychological trauma that cannot be resolved with short-term fixes.

## Best Practices in Disaster Philanthropy for Education-Focused Organizations

The philanthropic sector can play a critical role in helping students recover from natural disasters like Hurricane Harvey. Philanthropic leaders can begin by proactively identifying the role their organizations can play in disaster recovery before a disaster occurs. Although not every funder's mission explicitly includes immediate disaster relief, disasters affect nearly every funding priority, from health to education to equity. Consequently, there is a sense in which "All funders are disaster philanthropists."<sup>16</sup> Given the impact disasters have on K-12 and college students, funders that focus on education can proactively identify mission-aligned ways their organizations can support students in recovering from disasters. By incorporating disaster planning into their strategic plans and funding procedures, funders will be prepared to respond efficiently and effectively when a catastrophic event occurs.

Assisting disaster survivors, particularly in the short term, requires a degree of informed flexibility. As foundation executives Jonathan Raymond and Terry Grier argue, "Certain events necessitate different and flexible responses, irrespective of the fit with 'logic models' or 'strategic frameworks.' Natural disasters and their impact on children are one of those events."<sup>17</sup> Organizations requesting funds to fill basic needs, replace damaged school materials, provide counseling for students, and rebuild structures may not have staff capacity or time to go through a funder's traditional proposal review process. Funders do not have to take a blind leap of faith in their disaster philanthropy, however. By coordinating with other funders, gathering information about current needs and potential grantees, and getting to know local organizations operating on the front lines, funders can make reliable grantmaking decisions even when using an abbreviated review process.<sup>18</sup>

Funders can further increase their effectiveness in times of disaster by recognizing the importance of long-term support for survivors. According to FEMA, for every day of immediate relief survivors need after a catastrophe, they will need at least 100 days of support for long-term recovery.<sup>19</sup> Historically, however, philanthropy has focused on short-term needs while underfunding long-term needs. In 2015, for example, 34% of disaster-related philanthropic funding supported response and relief efforts, but only 5% supported reconstruction and recovery.<sup>20</sup> This drop in resources in the months and years after a disaster tends to coincide with a similar reduction in media coverage.<sup>21</sup> Philanthropic organizations that invest in long-term recovery make a lasting impact on the people they serve and send a signal to other funders to do the same.



## Looking Ahead

The response to Hurricane Harvey with respect to education has been strong in both the public and private sectors. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) are working with the state legislature to provide funding and regulatory relief for schools and students. The TEA established the Hurricane Harvey Task Force on school Mental Health Supports, led by the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute, to connect school and universities with the resources they need to meet the mental health needs of students and staff affected by the storm.<sup>22</sup> The Harvey Higher Education Learning Pathways (HELP) fund, administered by the Communities Foundation of Texas, provides financial aid to allow college and university students in the storm zone to stay in school. As of January 9, 2018, the crowdsourced fund stood at \$831,059, with an additional \$250,000 in match funding offered by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.<sup>23</sup> Scholarship America donated \$200,000 through its National Disaster Relief Fund to help college students affected by Harvey continue their studies without interruption.<sup>24</sup> The Michael and Susan Dell Foundation's Rebuild Texas Fund has raised \$92.1 million to date for long-term recovery efforts, including replacing educational facilities and supplies and supporting trauma counseling for students.<sup>25</sup>

These initiatives demonstrate that philanthropic organizations are uniquely positioned to work alongside public agencies to support recovery efforts when catastrophes strike. By investing in long-term recovery efforts and developing mission-aligned plans for responding to future emergencies, funders can maximize their impact even in times of disaster.

## Endnotes

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5 The remainder of this section draws on information provided in a conference call updating funders on Hurricane Harvey relief efforts. The call, organized by the OneStar Foundation, took place on December 13, 2017 and featured Damian Morales, Manager of Disaster Services for OneStar Foundation, and Betty Hastings, representing the Division of Disaster Recovery for the US Public Health Service.

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