Although many organizations are helping with the immediate disaster relief from Tropical Storm Harvey and flooding, United Way of Greater Houston has already begun preparing for the Bayou City’s long-term recovery, which may take three to five years.

“We’re going to have so many people that have never gone through a disaster before and do not know how to navigate the system,” Anna Babin, the president and CEO of United Way of Greater Houston, said.

Her organization works with a group of agencies that provide case management services to help people get all the resources the federal government can provide. In particular, the agencies aid people in completing paperwork, such as applying for a small business loan or applying for Federal Emergency Management Agency assistance.

United Way of Greater Houston also collects private money to supplement federal dollars.

On Aug. 27, the nonprofit established the Flood Relief Fund. As of Aug. 29, it has raised over $7.2 million, according to a press release. Donors include the Kinder Foundation, The Woodlands-based Anadarko Petroleum Corp. (NYSE: APC), the Houston Texans and the NFL.
While this may seem like a lot of money, it’s not even close to being enough, Babin said.

“In the whole scheme of life, it is very small,” she said. “This is a disaster of epic proportions, and it’s going to require an epic proportion of a response.”

She estimates that United Way of Greater Houston will need to raise between $25 million and $30 million to cover the long-term recovery services. For comparison, Houstonians raised $5.8 million after Hurricane Ike in 2008, and $11 million after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, she said.

The Flood Relief Fund money will go toward helping the most vulnerable population, such as the elderly, those with disabilities and those without homeowners' insurance, she said.

For example, “It may be that everything is taken care of, but they don’t have clothing for their work site – they may need work boots,” Babin said. “And no one else can help them with that, but United Way’s resources will.”

She also said the money can go toward helping minor home repair for those who don’t have property insurance.

“I don’t think anyone is going to be made whole or be back to normal after this,” she said. "It’s going to be a new normal, but we’re going to try and help people get that new normal as quickly as possible.”

A lot of the donations, she said, will also go toward mental health services.

“You can image the trauma that children are experiencing, having spent the night at a convenience store and then being picked up by dump trucks taking them to shelters,” she said. “And while it might be that we’re looking at a response that is for basic needs – food, shelter, clothing – there’s going to be some long-term needs around mental health services.”

For immediate relief, the nonprofit is supporting the American Red Cross and Salvation Army, and as always, she said, people are manning the organization’s 2-1-1 help line 24/7 to help any callers needing information and help, such as shelter locations, disaster services and where to get food.

“Right now, it’s (giving) good information and staying out of the way of immediate relief providers,” Babin said. “It’s also staying in connection with city-county offices of emergency management so that we are always coordinating and not stepping on each other’s toes.”
One of the biggest challenges for first responders such as the Salvation Army, Babin said, is that they can’t get to people.

“They’ve got the whole country mobilized to come,” she explained, “but they can’t get in because of the flooding on the major thoroughfares.”

The Red Cross also can’t get people in to set up more shelters for all the displaced people, she said.

Nevertheless, Babin is overcome by the outpouring of help from other United Ways across the U.S. and Canada. People are standing by to take calls and ready to come to Houston as soon as the roads are cleared.

“It’s about rebuilding a community,” she said, adding that long-term recovery can last three to five years.

She also said the numbers of people affected by Hurricane Harvey and the flooding won’t come until people begin registering with FEMA, but she expects the damage to be more widespread than Hurricane Ike.

“This is a marathon, not a sprint. We’ve got to get ourselves ready for the long haul,” Babin said.

Jen Para
Web producer

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