

Devastation of Hurricane Harvey affected us all

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Hurricane Harvey is another tragedy that has galvanized the entire nation into action.

First, we saw the utter devastation such a disaster wreaks on people – lives lost, homes and businesses destroyed, an entire city’s infrastructure severely damaged in ways it will take months, if not years, to fully restore.

It is hard to fully envision the magnitude of the destruction. Hurricane Harvey did not affect just one town, or even two. There were miles and miles of destruction all along the Texas and Louisiana coastline, extending well inland.

In the great city of Houston, there was hardly a street that did not experience flooding to some degree. You could hardly open a newspaper or look at a television screen without seeing image after image of water that reached to the rooftops in many suburban neighborhoods. We saw patches of metal that seemed to float along the surface of the floodwaters and we suddenly realized they were the roofs of cars. Even where the water was not as deep, we saw homes where the floods poured through doors and windows, destroying household contents and treasured family heirlooms.

And then there were the faces. Faces that showed fear, shock, and disbelief that such a thing could be happening to them, to their friends, to their city. Other faces were weary from long hours of the struggle just to survive.

And then those faces began to smile, to cry with joy as the hope of rescue came into sight. Whenever something like this happens, wherever it may be, that’s when emergency responders go to work. Police, search and rescue squads, emergency medical workers, and, of course, the National Guard immediately went into action to serve the people they have sworn to protect. They were joined by hundreds of ordinary citizens who turned out with boats of all sizes to look for victims stranded by swift floodwaters that turned streets into rivers.

Help came from all over the country and even from other nations, all ready to do whatever they could to save lives and ease the suffering of Harvey’s devastation.

Kansas is the lead state this year for the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, a multistate agreement that expedites emergency assistance between states when disasters occur and local resources are exhausted. The staff in the Kansas Division of Emergency Management

have done outstanding work in coordinating personnel and equipment to send to Texas and Louisiana. It is a job that is still ongoing and will probably continue for some time.

Kansas sent a number of swiftwater/ flood rescue teams to join in the emergency response operations. These teams were from the Kansas Fire Marshal's Office, Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism, Derby Fire Department, Chanute Fire Department, Hutchinson Fire Department, South Hutchinson Police Department, Manhattan Fire Department, Mission Township Fire Department, Neodesha Fire Department, Newton Fire Department/EMS, Parsons Fire Department, Pittsburg Fire Department, Salina Fire Department, Saline County Sheriff's Office, Sedgwick County Fire Department, Shawnee Fire Department, and Winfield Fire Department. Their objectives was to search for and rescue individuals, provide basic life support medical care, transport humans and animals to the nearest location for secondary air or land transport, provide shore-based and boat-based water rescue, provide animal rescues, and support helicopter and urban search and rescue in water environments.

We also have Kansas National Guardsmen and equipment on standby, ready to mobilize if requested. These are the type of missions we train for and there is never a shortage of Kansas Guardsmen ready to volunteer.

In addition to the trained emergency response personnel, we have seen an outpouring of support from everyday citizens. However, as much as it is human nature to want to rush to the aid of our fellow man, that aid must be given in a way that truly helps and does not hinder rescue and recovery efforts.

While sending truckloads of food, clothing and other such items displays the good intentions of the heart, it often only causes more problems. Such items need to be sorted, packaged and stored, which requires manpower that could be put to better use. There also has to be a place to store the goods until they can be distributed; sometimes there is nowhere to do that. Looking at the pictures from Texas and Louisiana, you can easily see why that may be the case.

Perishable foods present their own special time-sensitive problems and even non-perishable foods still have to be sorted, packaged and stored. Often, there is a glut of some items and not enough of others. We have seen instances where tons of donated items had to be discarded because they could not be used.

The best way to help the people of Texas and Louisiana is to donate money to reputable civic, service and faith-based organizations experienced in disaster response and recovery

operations. Donating money allows these groups to buy exactly what is needed, when it is needed.

Too often, well-meaning people self-deploy to a disaster area, which often does more harm than good. Food, water and other resources are already scarce in those areas and those self-deployed volunteers take resources from others who need it.

Search and rescue is dangerous work. I have heard tragic stories of people who have lost their own lives in the effort to save others. It is better to allow those who are trained for such work to conduct those rescue operations. They do not need to be rescuing volunteers in addition to those who are truly storm victims.

If you really feel the desire to volunteer your time and skills to help the people of Texas and Louisiana, I urge you to register with one of those agencies mentioned above, letting them know you are available and what skills you have. If there is a need for your assistance, you will be contacted.

And remember, while there are very real and very immediate needs in Texas and Louisiana, recovery is going to be a long, slow process. If you can't give money or volunteer now, there will be plenty of opportunities to serve later.

In the meantime, I urge all Kansans to take a look at their own emergency preparations. Do you have an emergency kit in your home and in your car? Do you have an emergency plan? Have you practiced it? When severe weather is imminent, do you listen to your weather radio or local news station and heed the warnings?

Every year, September is designated as Kansas Preparedness Month. That makes it the perfect time to make a kit and a plan if you don't already have one. Whatever you can do now to safeguard the lives and safety of you own family will make it easier for our dedicated emergency response workers should the unthinkable every happen in your own community.

Stay safe and remember the people of Texas and Louisiana.