

Full Statement on Hurricane Harvey Prep Failure From Indivisible Houston

“Hurricane Harvey may seem like the storm that never ends to those of us who like to read the news, but as you may know we’re not the only ones who feel that way.

In the wake of the flood, our hearts and spirits were lifted by the courage and organization of Harris County. Later we would see Houston Strong and Texas Strong take off, but I’m still waiting on my Harris County Strong T-shirt. I had no boat, but I and many others coordinated to communicate with those performing high seas rescue such as the Cajun Navy. We coordinated lists of potential drop points for resources when the waters cleared. We raised funds from generous people all over the world. And when the water cleared, we worked with BLM and other groups out in Lakewood and other affected areas. In some neighborhoods, they were the only groups that ever came to help.

So I was upset when, 24 hours ago, ProPublica published a damning, in-depth, thorough, well-researched report of the failure to act by Harris County Government on the emergency plan it had developed months earlier. My guess is that not everyone here has read it, so here are some of the greatest hits:

The county had a 17 page plan ready to go months ago that predicted correctly Red Cross would be slow. It failed to plan for that contingency over, and over, and over again. The plan- stamped on the cover by the judge’s seal- said that it would take a week before Red Cross would step in and that the county would manage shelters during that time. Only one training for managing shelters was ever held, not nearly enough to train anyone to care for thousands of displaced refugees. All scenarios in the training presumed the Red Cross would be up and running, even though the plan did not.

When Harvey hit, most employees were completely unaware a plan even existed, and were shocked once asked to open shelters in the wake of the Red Cross’ predicted failure. One employee surprised to learn of the existence of a plan was my commissioner, Mr. Raddack. When reporters pressed him on this, he basically said “no comment”.

Mr. Radack voted for the plan.

When pressed on this, Commissioner Radack has contended that expecting anything more than what was done was unrealistic. Commissioner Radack blamed the Red Cross for slowness, the city for poor recovery, and Congress for failure to prevent Harvey.

When reporters asked for a list of shelters surveyed in advance of the storm, the county accidentally forwarded the press emails of them scrambling for an explanation to give. Because there was no list. It doesn’t exist. Remember, the plan was never followed. As the county media specialist said to her supervisor: **“Do you want to reply to the reporter or do you want me to tell her these documents do not exist. She’s going to ask why?”**

Her supervisor then told reporters that the list didn’t exist because the county expected Red Cross to arrange it, even though the county plan, which no one remembered existed, expected the county to be up and running before Red Cross was, and that a list of shelters can be gathered before a natural disaster. The supervisor also claimed to work with HISD in preparation for the storm, which was news to HISD.

Gentlemen: this is above politics. Plenty of Harris County residents have addressed the court on Harvey. Plenty of students in this county are still homeless and struggling to keep up with their school work in spite of their hardships. They eat off grills. They sleep in tents. Black mold consumes their homes. They're not back on their feet. This week, several of us are still working to help get wardrobes in order for survivors of the flood, and will continue to do so for as long as we have to.

It's time to acknowledge mistakes, huge, hurricane-sized mistakes with county management so we can fix them. This is a matter of public accountability."