



**American  
Red Cross**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Media Statement**

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FOR MEDIA ONLY

**WASHINGTON, DC, October 3, 2017** — Once again, *ProPublica* has written a negative story about the American Red Cross—rather than acknowledging the realities and complexities of disaster response. In this particular story they cherry-picked anecdotes, instead of giving readers a full and accurate account of the aid we have delivered, under extremely challenging conditions – for the largest flooding disaster in American history.

We would like to challenge anyone—including *ProPublica*—to justify calling our response to Hurricane Harvey “anemic” or stating that the “Red Cross Was Not There.”

Today, more than 1,100 people remain in 8 emergency shelters in Texas, and more than 2,100 Red Cross disaster workers are on the ground providing support. Working alongside our partners, the Red Cross has helped to provide more than 421,000 overnight stays in emergency shelters, served more than 3.7 million meals and snacks, and distributed more than 1.3 million relief items. Red Cross volunteers have also provided more than 112,000 mental health and health services to support and care for people affected by Harvey.

And while *ProPublica*’s story mentions the technical difficulties we experienced while standing up a first-ever cash assistance program, it doesn’t acknowledge that the Red Cross has authorized payment of \$400 to more than 370,000 Texas households severely affected by Hurricane Harvey. That’s more than \$148 million in direct financial aid to people in need as of September 28—and we continue to process applications.

Disasters, by their nature, are chaotic. That means things don’t always go as planned. In the early days of our response to Harvey, we couldn’t gain access to every impacted community without putting our volunteers at risk. But we did make every effort to be everywhere we could—including loading our volunteers onto Houston City dump trucks to get them to shelters. That’s reality in a disaster zone—not failure.

Despite the fact that we are incredibly busy responding to three historic disasters, we responded to *ProPublica* with 9 pages of answers thoroughly and transparently. As in the past, they used very little of the information we provided in their story. As a result, we are publicly posting our Q&A with *ProPublica* (in full below)—and the *very few* highlighted passages they chose to use—so readers can determine for themselves whether this was a fair and balanced story.

Finally, we would invite Justin Elliott to visit our Houston shelters with us—or any of our shelters in future disasters—so that he can speak to shelter residents and to Red Cross volunteers to obtain a more complete context of the challenges and realities of disaster response. Writing a piece such as this one without broader context is, at the very least, dial-it-in “journalism.”

### **About the American Red Cross:**

*The American Red Cross shelters, feeds and provides emotional support to victims of disasters; supplies about 40 percent of the nation’s blood; teaches skills that save lives; provides international humanitarian aid; and supports military members and their families. The Red Cross is a not-for-profit organization that depends on volunteers and*

*the generosity of the American public to perform its mission. For more information, please visit [redcross.org](http://redcross.org) or [cruzrojaamericana.org](http://cruzrojaamericana.org), or visit us on Twitter at [@RedCross](https://twitter.com/RedCross).*

**These are our specific questions, but if there's anything else we should know, please include that in your response as well.**

**1. In big-picture terms, how well has the Red Cross done in responding to Harvey?**

The American Red Cross has been able to meet a tremendous amount of need in the wake of the largest flooding response in U.S. history.

- To date, **more than 414,000 overnight shelter stays** have been provided in Red Cross and partner shelters for Hurricane Harvey.
- Along with our partners, we have served **almost 3.2 million meals and snacks** in Texas and Louisiana.
- More than 2,700 Red Cross disaster workers are still on the ground in Texas, with more than 170 currently on the way and many more expected in the weeks and months to come.
- As many as 157 emergency response vehicles are helping to deliver meals and relief supplies across the hardest hit areas of Texas.
- We've distributed more than 1 million relief items like diapers, bug spray, cleaning supplies, coolers, and comfort kits containing deodorant, toothbrushes, toothpaste and other hygiene items, in Texas and Louisiana.
- Red Cross volunteers have provided more than 101,000 mental health and health services to support and care for people in Texas and Louisiana.
- The Red Cross has provided more than \$142 million in financial assistance to more than 356,000 Texas households severely affected by Hurricane Harvey and continues to process applications. (As of September 27)

**2. Has the Red Cross conducted any initial after-action reviews or assessments of its performance in Harvey? If yes, can you release them to us or do you plan to release them later?**

We are still in the emergency response phase, but once our work is completed, we will make an evaluation scorecard of our performance on Hurricane Harvey available on our website.

**3. As we have previously written about and discussed with you,<sup>1</sup> the Red Cross under Gail McGovern has shrunk significantly in terms of number of paid employees and local chapters. Does the leadership of the Red Cross believe the organization has the resources to respond to a storm the size of Harvey?**

First, the American Red Cross maintains a strong presence throughout the country. We have volunteers in about 90% of counties (of a total of just over 3200 U.S. counties and county equivalents).

A storm the size of Harvey tests the resources of all organizations, but we believe we have been able to mobilize enough paid employees and volunteers to respond. In recent years, and as is common in many sectors, through the use of technology we have also become **more efficient and effective in our response**. For example, RC View, a technology solution for analyzing data and managing operations, has helped us to see where the damage is and target our response to where the needs are without having to deploy hundreds of people on the ground to get that information. In addition, we have become better at integrating spontaneous local volunteers into our operations and engaging other aid organizations as partners to expand the reach and scope of assistance we are able to deliver.

**4. We're trying to understand the scale of the Red Cross response. A Sept. 13 statement on your website states that "there are roughly 6,000 American Red Cross volunteers on the ground in 13 states" responding to both Harvey and Irma.<sup>2</sup>**

During Katrina, "more than 244,000 disaster workers, 95 percent of them volunteers" responded, according to your site.<sup>3</sup>

The response to Sandy was “powered by more than 17,000 trained workers from all over the country.”<sup>4</sup>

- a. Do these manpower figure represent an apples to apples comparison of the responses to these three disasters? If not, can you explain what the correct figures are?
- b. If these figures are apples to apples, why was the Harvey and Irma response so much smaller than the Sandy and Katrina responses?

These figures do not represent an apples to apples comparison because for Harvey and Irma you are citing workers currently on the ground not the cumulative number over the past month. Also, the Harvey/Irma numbers below are for the first month. The Sandy numbers you reference were cumulative after six months.

In the first month of our response, the Red Cross has deployed a total of more than 13,000 trained disaster workers – 91 percent volunteers – to support those affected by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria. As of today, this includes more than 7,300 workers for Harvey, more than 5,400 for Irma, and 580 for Maria.

In addition to the total of more than 13,000, we’ve put more than 3,200 spontaneous local volunteers to work supporting our relief efforts in Texas and Florida. Spontaneous local volunteers were included in our totals for Sandy, but we break them out separately now. We are not going to go back more than a decade to provide apples to apples for Katrina.

5. **Houston City Councilman Dave Martin has publicly criticized the Red Cross for what he describes as an anemic response to the storm. According to Martin, he ran into CEO Gail McGovern in a parking lot several days after Harvey hit. Martin says he raised his concerns with McGovern, and she responded: “Do you know how much we raised with Katrina? 2 billion. We won’t even raise hundreds of millions here.”**

- a. **Can you comment on Martin’s account of his encounter with McGovern?**

Ms. McGovern did run into Councilman Dave Martin. He brought up Hurricane Katrina and the money Red Cross had given out then. Ms. McGovern replied that she was not at the Red Cross during Katrina but thought we would not raise the same amount of money for Harvey as we did for Katrina. To date, **donations for Hurricane Harvey total approximately \$350M** vs. \$2.2 Billion in donations for Hurricane Katrina.

- b. **Do you have any other response to his public criticisms?**

The Councilman feels a responsibility to his district, and **we understand his frustration**. During a disaster, Red Cross faces the same mobility and physical barriers to access as area residents. Flooding and impassable roadway conditions prevented us and others from accessing his district in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. However, we provided service delivery shortly afterwards, and we met with Councilman Martin to outline this, and are working with him to address any concerns he may have going forward.

6. **In an email exchange on the afternoon of Sunday, Aug 27, an official from Humble, TX, asked an emergency management official in Harris County about getting Red Cross help to assist with a shelter. Kristina Clark of the Harris County emergency management office responded:**

**“I hate to say this but the Red Cross is completely out of resources and have almost no road accessibility. The best thing I can recommend is to open something and message to your people to bring THEIR OWN food, sleeping bags, clothes, medication, etc.”**

**Can you comment on this? Was there a shortage of resources?**

As context for this response, please read the following opening for an *NBC News* story time dated Houston, August 27, 2017, 8:01PM.

*"Rescuers answered thousands of calls from people trapped in Houston on Sunday as torrential rain from deadly Hurricane Harvey caused 'catastrophic flooding' in the city and across southeast Texas, officials said. This event is unprecedented and all impacts are unknown and beyond anything experienced," the National Weather Service said Sunday morning. Heavy rain continued to pour over Houston early Sunday afternoon, with some downtown areas knee-deep in water, and shut down portions of highways flooded with as much as 10 feet of water."*

*"Houston police said Sunday afternoon that more than 1,200 people had been rescued, with more to come. The weather service warned that flooding victims should go to their rooftops and not their attics to avoid being trapped by the rushing waters. Police in the city of Dickinson, southeast of Houston, made an online plea for people with boats to help in rescues. "This is a life-threatening situation," said Michael Palmer, lead meteorologist at The Weather Channel."*

Considering the historic, severe weather on August 27th, the Red Cross was affected just like every public safety agency and disaster response organization. On that day and in the many days that followed, operations were hindered by the lack of high-water vehicles. Those vehicles that were available were rationed to agencies in segments of hours of service. By the evening of August 26th, the Red Cross had positioned sufficient shelter materials (i.e. cots, blankets, ready-to-eat meals, etc.) to support 28,000 shelter residents. As well, the Red Cross was operating 30 shelters with a population of 1,496 and supporting shelters operated by partners. At one point, Red Cross volunteers were loaded into the back of a Houston City dump truck as the only form of transportation to make their way to support a Red Cross shelter.

It is difficult to comment as to whether Ms. Clark was aware of the circumstances that seem so apparent to so many. The Red Cross was not "completely out of resources". And at least 21,496 individuals were provided with cots, blankets, food and a dry, safe and secure refuge from the most intense Hurricane to make landfall in more than a decade.

Finally, with regard to people bringing "their own" food and supplies, as we always do in advance of major impending disasters like Hurricane Harvey, we did share messaging across our platforms that in those first few days of the response, that people should bring their own emergency supplies with them to shelters. Ms. Clark in this case was correct – with such difficulty getting resources and volunteers into some of the hardest-hit areas in Texas, we encouraged people to bring what they could to the shelters – which we then augmented in the days to come and are still doing today.

**7. In a Aug. 30 email, a Colorado County EM official, wrote:**

**"Persons needing intermediate-term shelters have been transferred to the Red Cross Shelter in Sealy. Red Cross approved the shelter, but the promised shelter management teams and the supply trailer never arrived, nor do they know where they went."**

**Can you comment on what happened in this case?**

By August 30<sup>th</sup>, the Colorado County area had endured five days of constant rain from Hurricane Harvey. It became difficult to consistently provision these shelters as augmenting shelter staff and supplies became landlocked in Houston due to the accumulation of more than more than 50 inches of rain, eclipsing a 39-year record for rainfall. The rain, flooding and inaccessibility issues affected service delivery intended by all State, County and Red Cross disaster response organizations.

The emergency manager requested a shelter in Colorado County during these early days. Due to flooded roads and severe weather, the Red Cross was unable to transport the staff and shelter material resources necessary to Colorado County. As Red Cross was trying to find ways to get people and supplies to Colorado County, the emergency manager called and cancelled the request of Red Cross stating that he was opening the shelter as an independent shelter. After the roads were open, local Red Cross representatives made contact with the emergency manager and delivered cots and blankets to meet ongoing sheltering needs.

**8. In a Sept. 9 email, DeWitt County Emergency Management Coordinator Cyndi Smith wrote to Debbie Ellsworth of the Red Cross:**

**“Red Cross was not there as they were suppose[d] to be with the shelter and again no communication to what this is actually about and that you have been in DeWitt County doing anything.”**

**How do you respond to Smith’s comments?**

On August 25<sup>th</sup>, Hurricane Harvey made landfall near DeWitt County as a Category 4 Hurricane: the strongest hurricane to make landfall in the United States in more than a decade. As a Category 4, DeWitt County was impacted by the advancing bands of rain and wind, with the winds increasing to between 130 – 154 miles per hour. Despite these severe conditions, on August 24<sup>th</sup>, the day prior to landfall, the **Red Cross opened two shelters in DeWitt County**: one in Curoe, and one in Yorktown. Each shelter was opened and staffed with two Red Cross shelter workers – a minimal but effective staff. Each shelter was supplied with ready-to-eat meals, water, cots and blankets.

In the days following landfall, it became difficult to consistently provision these shelters as augmenting shelter staff and supplies became landlocked in Houston due to the accumulation of more than more than 50 inches of rain, eclipsing a 39-year record for rainfall. The rain, flooding and inaccessibility issues affected service delivery intended by State, County and Red Cross disaster response organizations.

Over the course of response activities in DeWitt County, the Red Cross maintained these shelters **and recorded a total of 1,599 overnight stays**. It would seem the individuals who found safe shelter accommodations could affirm that the Red Cross was present and had a material impact in DeWitt County.

- 9. There was subsequently a meeting between Smith and Red Cross officials Debra Murphy-Luera, Mike Mitchell, and Debbie Ellsworth to discuss “lack of communications, supplies and other issues.” Can you tell us anything about what happened at the meeting?**

The referenced meeting was scheduled to discuss the broader topic of potential reimbursement to the Curoe Independent School District for cost incurred by the School System for the use of the Curoe Intermediate School as a shelter. The meeting was attended and guided by County Judge Daryl L. Fowler. Judge Fowler, in discussion of expectations, communications and services provided, offered a balanced assessment that there were unmet expectations by all parties (i.e. DeWitt County, Curoe Independent School District and the Red Cross). He observed that the Shelter Annex (date February 11, 2013) to the DeWitt County Emergency Management Plan was out of date and thus specific expectation could not be assessed. Judge Fowler subsequently stated “that “we” the cooperating jurisdictions are to review this Annex annually and it preparation is under the auspices of the American Red Cross. There is a general consensus that an annual review prior to Hurricane Harvey would have been beneficial to all parties concerned.”

- 10. It’s our understanding that the software the Red Cross and TeleTech were using to identify shelters with openings during Harvey faced serious problems, sometimes saying shelters had open spots when in fact they didn’t. This may have been due to failure to update the software with accurate data. Some storm victims who called the Red Cross hotline were directed to shelters where there were no openings. Can you comment on how the shelter locating software performed during Harvey?**

The shelter locations are based upon information entered into the National Shelter System (NSS). This information is updated at regular intervals to reflect shelter populations and capacity. Call agents have access to that system. Occasionally, the data input into the National Shelter System has a time lag from what is actually occurring at a particular shelter, and the moment that data is entered into the NSS. This occurs especially during evacuations when **shelter populations are changing on a minute-by-minute basis**. At the peak of Hurricane Harvey operations, there were as many as 284 shelters.

- 11. In Jefferson County, a Red Cross government liaison was kicked out of the local EOC because, in the account of Mike White, “Everything we asked him to do I didn’t feel was**

**getting done in a timely manner.” Red Cross staffer Natalie Warren followed up on this incident. Can you weigh in on what happened at the Jefferson EOC?**

An experienced Red Cross volunteer was assigned to a Government Relations – EOC position located at the Jefferson County Emergency Operations Center. The volunteer was provided a position orientation where he understood his responsibility was to transmit disaster operation information between the Jefferson County EOC and the Red Cross District Six Operations Team. The volunteer was in his assigned position for several days and considered to be performing well. At the moment in question, the volunteer was working simultaneously on his computer and cell phone – communicating with District Six – when he was approached by Mr. White who apparently assessed his engagement as something not of Mr. White’s liking. Without explanation at the moment or later, Mr. White asked the Red Cross volunteer to leave the EOC. The Red Cross did not provide a replacement representative as the working environment at Jefferson County EOC did not afford respectful treatment to all assigned persons.

#### **Red Cross answers to ProPublica follow up questions September 29, 2017**

- 1. On the numbers -- thanks for the context. For what we believe is an apples to apples comparison:**

**Six days after Sandy made landfall, the Red Cross reported it had “more than 5,000” workers responding to the disaster.**

**Six days after Harvey made landfall, the Red Cross reported “2,300 disaster workers to Texas” were in Texas. Eleven days after Harvey made landfall, the Red Cross reported having “more than 3,100 Red Cross disaster workers that are on the ground in Texas.”**

**This is a significantly lower figure for the Harvey response. Does this reflect the Red Cross shrinking as an organization? A belief that Harvey was a less serious storm? Something else?**

The answers to your questions above are No. **We had more workers responding six days after Sandy because we had launched relief operations in 11 states,** the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico for Superstorm Sandy – vs. two states, Texas and Louisiana for Hurricane Harvey.

- 2. The superintendent of the Cuero school district, Micah Dyer, managed the Cuero shelter. In Dyer’s account, the two Red Cross shelter volunteers had no experience in running shelters. The county was forced to pay additional workers to manage the shelter. Dyer said the Red Cross did not show up with supplies until the fourth day the shelter was open, and that there were too few cots and MREs for the number of people in the shelter. He estimates that 30 percent of the MREs provided had already gone bad. He also estimates there was only enough water for a day, and that there were no blankets. Can you comment on his account?**

As context to the singular focus on the shelter at the Cuero Intermediate School, this shelter is but one of nine shelters opened by the Coastal Bend Chapter within the Texas Gulf Coast Region over a 36-hour period, during tropical storm force wind and driving rain. And, as noted in a previous response, DeWitt County Judge Daryl L. Fowler offered a balanced assessment that there were unmet expectations by all parties (i.e. DeWitt County, Cuero Independent School District and the Red Cross). He observed that the Shelter Annex (date February 11, 2013) to the DeWitt County Emergency Management Plan was out of date and thus specific expectation could not be assessed. Judge Fowler subsequently stated “that “we” the cooperating jurisdictions are to review this Annex annually and it preparation is under the auspices of the American Red Cross. There is a general consensus that an annual review prior to Hurricane Harvey would have been beneficial to all parties concerned.” The Red Cross agrees with the Judge’s assessment.

The DeWitt County Emergency Manager initially indicated that the Cuero Shelter would open on Saturday, August 26<sup>th</sup>, and the Chapter planned accordingly. At midnight August 24, the Emergency Manager decided to open the shelter at the next morning (August 25<sup>th</sup>) at 08:00AM. The Red Cross was able to assign two shelter workers, albeit with limited shelter experience, by the opening time and to send an additional 3 shelter workers later in the day. The



Red Cross was not consulted in the County's decision to pay additional shelter workers and has no knowledge as to the reasons for that decision.

Any assertion that the Red Cross did not provision the shelter until the fourth day is an uninformed assertion. The Red Cross provided cots, blankets and water on Friday, August 25<sup>th</sup>; additional comfort kits and blankets on Saturday, August 26<sup>th</sup>; and, additional supplies including ready-to-eat meals on Sunday, August 27<sup>th</sup>. On Saturday August 26<sup>th</sup>, while the provisioning included an additional 125 cots, the County representative indicated that additional cots were not needed.

The observation that the Red Cross did not provide sufficient MREs for the number of people seems nonsensical as the school's kitchen was fully operational and providing meals and water throughout the period of time the shelter was open. Likewise, the observation that "30 percent of the MREs provided had already gone bad" does not appear to be supportable. The markings on the boxes of MREs indicates two dates: a "PKD/LOT" date of 04/30/2013; and a "Test Date" of 04/2018. Perhaps these dates were misread: the MREs made available at the shelter were useable until April 2018.

As indicated previously, the Red Cross provided blankets and water. As a point of note, the City of Cuero sustained its running water system throughout the hurricane. We have no record of any unmet request for water.

- 3. a. In the attached facility use agreement with the Cuero school district, the Red Cross said it would provide a shelter manager and also conduct a pre and post usage survey of available food and supplies. Mr. Dyer said none of this happened. Can you comment?**

As indicated previously, the Red Cross agrees with the assessment of Judge Fowler that there were unmet expectations by all parties. Given the change in the schedule of the opening, and the concurrent opening of eight other shelters, the Red Cross did not provide a Shelter Manager at the Cuero shelter. By the opening time of 08:00AM, a number of local evacuees were present at opening time. In the rush to open and set up the shelter, neither the Red Cross nor the County Facility Coordinator conducted the pre-usage survey. Interestingly, the Superintendent was unaware of the shelter agreement or any of its stipulations until he was provided a copy of the agreement by the Red Cross on September 15, 2017. As well, and following the post-usage survey and consistent with the Shelter Agreement, the Red Cross agreed to reimburse the Cuero Independent School District for utilities, food, disposable items, custodial services and other costs.

- b. In general, to what extent does the Red Cross view facilities usage agreements as binding contracts? How are these contracts used in Red Cross planning for disaster response?**

The Red Cross enters into Facility Use Agreements with facility owners to document the terms and conditions that will apply if, during a disaster relief operation, the Red Cross and owner agree that the Red Cross may use and occupy the facility for Red Cross activities. In most instances, we negotiate these agreements in "blue skies" so we can act quickly when a disaster is looming or has already occurred. We are reviewing the circumstances in Cuero and will address any contract-related issues directly with the school district.