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Galveston fears post-Ike Census means lost funds

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GALVESTON, Texas (AP) — Nearly 1 1/2 years after Hurricane Ike battered Galveston, this southeast Texas island community fears the natural disaster could land another harsh blow.

Galveston officials say they could lose millions of dollars in state and federal funding if this year's U.S. Census count puts the city's population below 50,000, a benchmark used to determine funding levels for everything from public bus systems to housing repairs.

Ike made landfall just outside Galveston in September 2008, damaging 75 percent of the city's homes, forcing thousands to move off the island and dropping the population from 57,000 to a current estimate of 46,000. The city's poverty rate already was nearly twice the U.S. average and median household income about a quarter below the state average.

Galveston has appealed to Census officials, asking them to include in the upcoming count residents living off the island because they still are repairing or rebuilding homes.

"We still have pockets of the town where half of the homes on the block are under repair and no one is living there or they look to be abandoned," said Lloyd Renderer, Galveston's assistant city manager.

Census officials, however, say they cannot make exceptions for communities hit by storms like Ike, the costliest natural disaster in Texas history.

"The Census counts people where they live and where they are expected to live as of April 1, 2010," said spokesman Eduardo Guity. "The fact is those individuals who left Galveston and were not able to come back, they are using, consuming the resources of other cities. Therefore, (funding) should go to the areas that are being used."

Census officials are promising to canvass neighborhoods multiple times to ensure every resident is counted, including those forced from their homes who have moved in with friends and relatives. Census officials will be in Galveston Thursday as part of the 2010 Census Portrait of America Road Tour encouraging Americans to fill out Census forms.

In central Galveston's Bayou Shores neighborhood, many homes are in mid-repair, while others remain boarded up and untouched. Empty, grassy lots dot the areas where other houses once stood.

Resident Ron McCall, who stood on a metal ladder as he painted the front of his now repaired home, pointed to an empty lot next door and said the woman who owned the home that once was there has not rebuilt because her contractor went bankrupt. Other neighbors, he said, didn't have flood insurance and have been unable to pay for repairs.

City officials say delays in federal funding for housing repairs also have prevented residents from returning.

"I don't know if it's going to happen for a good many years," McCall, 67, said of Galveston's population returning to pre-Ike levels. "A lot of homeowners left and I don't know if they will ever come back."

Guity said Census officials are "going the extra mile" to ensure all Galveston residents are counted. Last year, the Census Bureau canvassed neighborhoods to verify addresses and determine whether residents were living there or if an actual structure was still at the location.

The bureau also is hiring Galveston residents familiar with neighborhoods to revisit areas beginning March 1. Galveston neighborhoods will be canvassed either by mail or in person at least seven times, Guity said.

Similar Census concerns have been voiced in New Orleans, which also lost population when residents were forced to relocate after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Comparative efforts are being made to get everyone there counted, said spokeswoman Andrea Loyola.

In Orleans, St. Bernard and Plaquemines — New Orleans' three parishes most affected by Katrina — Census forms are being hand delivered "to get as accurate a count as possible," Loyola said.

Galveston officials, meanwhile, are stressing to residents — including immigrants and minorities who historically have been hesitant to participate in the population count — the importance of filling out their Census forms in the wake of Ike.

"This is going to help our recovery," said city spokeswoman Alicia Cahill.

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