

# After Ike, city cleanup continues



Photo by Dave Schafer

Loren Raun, right, and her daughter, Paige, 11, clean up Hurricane Ike debris at a resident's house in early December. Raun and her family were among 113 volunteers who cleaned up storm debris in the yards of elderly or disabled residents through the Neighbors Helping Neighbors program.

By Dave Schafer

On an early December Saturday morning, city employee Loren Raun and her family left a six-foot-by-six-foot pile of dead tree limbs in front of Marilyn Shields Smith's house. Shields Smith couldn't have been happier.

"I'm so thankful. I didn't know where I was going to turn for help cleaning up my yard, then the city stepped up to the plate," said Shields Smith. She sat inside her white house, the residue of masking tape X's still clinging to the tan-framed windows. "If I could've done it, I would've."

Shields Smith's double hip replacements, rheumatoid arthritis, back problems, and poor circulation prevent her from standing very long.

Raun, a senior environmental analyst in the Mayor's Office, her husband, son and daughter were there as volunteers for the Neighbors Helping Neighbors program Mayor Bill White introduced Nov. 6. The program assigned volunteers to clean

Hurricane Ike debris from the yards of elderly and disabled residents unable to do the work. The Rauns spent 90 minutes cleaning Shields Smith's small yard, carrying tree limbs and seven black bags of trash to the curb for Solid Waste Management workers to pick up.

"I thought this would be fun," Raun said. "Volunteering is part of our family, and something like this is good because you feel like you're really making a difference."

Nearly three months after Ike raked the Gulf Coast, the effects were still visible. The city had cleaned up 85 to 90 percent of the storm debris, leaving troublesome tree limbs and stumps in parks and debris that residents needed help getting to the curb.

## Some still in need of help

Four days before the Rauns cleaned her yard, Shields Smith received a visit from Maria Bolanos, senior community liaison with the Mayor's Citizens Assistance Office.

Shields Smith was one of more than 700 people who called 311 requesting help through the Neighbors Helping Neighbors program, according to Rogene Calvert, director of personnel and the Volunteer Initiatives Program in the Mayor's Office. The city stopped accepting requests Dec. 3.

Service requests coded as a Neighbors Helping Neighbors request were opened by Alyce

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Coffey of Solid Waste Management or Krystal De La Cruz of the Mayor's Citizens' Assistance Office. Coffey assigned requests that needed limbs cut down to a contractor because the city didn't want volunteers using chain saws. Simple jobs, like Shields Smith's, De La Cruz assigned to a liaison.

When the scope of the job was uncertain, SWM and CAO sent out representatives to assess the yard.

Bolanos spent 10 minutes assessing the severity of the debris and having Shields Smith sign documents, including a right-of-entry form and an agreement not to sue the city if a volunteer damaged her yard while cleaning it.

Shields Smith sat on her armless wooden chair facing the television, happy to sign the forms and get help. Bolanos was kind and sensitive: "Believe me, I'm the first one to understand your frustration," she said.

Bolanos had 10 folders to complete that Tuesday. In the days after the announcement, community liaisons worked late to visit residents who had requested help. The 12 liaisons visited more than 250 citizens in the two weeks after White announced the program, said Claudia Vasquez, CAO director.

"When Ike hit, we saw an outpouring of city employees helping everywhere," she said. "Once it started tapering off, there were people who still had Ike-related issues.

"The challenge remained for elderly or disabled people. They may not have had the ability to get help in the days after Ike, and if that's the case, they still can't go out and get help. So we go to those who can't

do this sort of thing for themselves."

Liaisons visited residents who submitted requests until the end of the year, Vasquez said.

Before leaving Shields Smith's house, Bolanos said, "If anyone contacts you about this, let them know that you've already signed a right-of-entry form and you are ready for help."

After making her rounds, Bolanos turned in her folders containing the signed documents to De La Cruz. Her work was done, but others were just starting.



Photo by Dave Schaefer

Kenny Reeves of Clemons Tree Service uses an extendable chain saw to cut down hanging limbs at Gus Wortham Golf Course.

### Helping Neighbors Helping Neighbors

Shields Smith's file took a direct route to Calvert's desk. Others went to Coffey's desk in SWM. If the resident was disabled and under 60, Coffey sent the job to the city's FEMA contractor to clean up debris. The crew chain sawed the limbs into manageable sizes and left them on the ground for volunteers to take to the curb.

If the resident was 60 or older, Coffey printed out the reports and took them to Health & Human Service's Area Agency

on Aging. The agency funded contractors to cut down the limbs.

Calvert assigned teams of volunteers to the houses that didn't need professional help. In the first three weekends, volunteers cleared 40 yards.

The city asked teams of volunteers to work four hours on a Saturday, perhaps cleaning two to four yards.

Calvert had assigned 39 volunteer teams, and a total of 113 volunteers, as of Dec. 13. Those numbers didn't just happen. She devoted large chunks of her

days to recruiting volunteers, Calvert said, and she pulled out all her contacts: Volunteer Houston, CitizensNet, civic clubs, church groups, Mission Houston.

"This has been the highest priority," she said. "But it's worth it for everyone. This project has been a lot of work for all, but they've reaped a lot of benefits."

It also required Calvert to be on call Saturdays. When they finished Shields Smith's yard, the Raun's, like other volunteers, reported to Calvert. One more yard down, about 160 more to go.

"The program is here to serve, to provide what services the city can while the residents help each other," Coffey said. "That's part of what government does."

### Parks and lots

Meanwhile, city forester Victor Cordova walked quickly around tiny Castillo Park. The walk was unnecessary, not only because of the park's size, but also because he could see a thick branch on the ground by one of the park's three stout trees.

Cordova was checking the hanging and leaning limb removal done by Beck

Recovery Services. Beck contracted with the city to cut down and remove broken limbs two inches or longer. The company did it in two phases: One crew cut them down, another crew collected them for disposal.

Beck signed off on Castillo Nov. 24, but the limb collector hadn't been there.

"Cutting up is fun. Picking up is the hard part," Cordova said.

Instead of signing off on the completion sheet, Cordova would place it in a pile to return to Beck.

Castillo was one of the first 50 parks Cordova and other Parks employees inspected during the first round in early December. Before Ike cleanup is certified complete, they'll walk all 347 city parks.

According to Daniel Gutierrez, SWM deputy director, more than 200 contractor crews were working on hanging tree limbs, leaning trees and stumps in city parks.

The city estimated debris cleanup city-wide would cost \$250 million, according to Jim Locke, Finance assistant director. SWM efforts would cost about \$108 million, which FEMA would cover if the work was done by April 26, and possibly later if FEMA extends the deadline. The city had received about \$48 million as of Dec. 15, Locke said.

On Dec. 1, the city resumed its regular heavy trash schedule, but garbage collection crews were still alert for storm debris that people put out as they repaired their homes.

"If we see something, we'll go get it," Gutierrez said.

As residents received insurance money to repair their homes, damaged sheetrock, wood and drywall were sprouting up in vacant lots that Police's neighborhood protection division had already cleared of downed limbs. Ed Robinson, chief inspector, was sending out the division's 24-cubic yard self-loading grappler truck to clear the lots.

"That will be going on for a while," he said. "That's the nature of the beast. People are trying to get rid of this as best as they can, and we are, too."