



*Houston's Democratic Socialists of America chapter came together to help Houstonians after Hurricane Harvey. The volunteers helped out in people's homes and raised money, which they used for cash cards to help those in need.*

All photos courtesy of the Houston Democratic Socialists of America Facebook Group unless otherwise noted.

# Activism After Harvey: The Democratic Socialists of America Respond to the Storm

*By Christopher Kessinger*

Before Hurricane Harvey made landfall, Houston Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) chairs Amy Zachmeyer and Nick Bunce began to consider the organization's next move. They started a fundraising effort on the now-defunct website YouCaring, hoping to raise a few thousand dollars to buy supplies to distribute to the hardest-hit. With the storm still pouring trillions of gallons of rainwater over Houston, they found themselves with an unexpected problem: the fundraiser was a massive success. All in all, they raised over \$120,000, far more money than they knew how to distribute. "We start[ed] panicking because our treasurer had just been using their personal bank account to cash out stuff in the past. We had raised, like, \$300 here and \$200 there — you know, small amounts of money," Zachmeyer explained. Before they could even touch the money, the small political activist group had to legally incorporate. One of their members was a lawyer, and he filed the necessary

paperwork online.<sup>1</sup> That was the easy part. As the storm finally departed the region, they had to find a way to put that money to use.

Zachmeyer and Bunce contacted a member of the DSA's Oklahoma City chapter who worked in disaster relief. Charitable organizations would already be inundated with donations of food, water, and clothing, he told them; buying more would be a waste. People have individualized needs — everything from medication to car repairs — that charities do not provide because it is hard to purchase those things in bulk. The financial burden for these items remains on the storm survivors, so what they needed most was money.<sup>2</sup>

The DSA had a three-part plan to help Houstonians. The first step they took was to purchase prepaid cash cards, after which they distributed them \$200 at a time to anyone who asked. That was not much per person, but it added up quickly. Zachmeyer pointed out, "We didn't have enough money to furnish entire homes. We would have helped three people if we had done that. So instead, we decided to spend smaller amounts."<sup>3</sup> They made specific purchases for a few individuals — a mattress here, a child's car seat there — that would not be covered by the \$200 card, but on the whole, they found that people knew what they needed, and a lack of money was their only obstacle.

The DSA found that people had trouble accepting the idea that the money was free, with no means-testing. "People aren't used to receiving aid just because they need it. They're used to having to prove that they need it," Zachmeyer said. "They would want to tell you what had happened and why



*During Harvey, Amy Zachmeyer worked with the Communication Workers of America as an organizer for the Texas State Employees Union. Today she works full time for the Democratic Socialists of America.*

Photo courtesy of Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey.

they really needed it because they felt guilty taking aid even though they were in great need.” They were worried that they would be denied unless they sufficiently proved they had been harmed by the storm. They shared their stories with her, which began to take a psychological toll. Another volunteer, visiting from the DSA’s Chicago chapter, was a social worker, and she saw signs of vicarious traumatization in Zachmeyer, who was forced to take a break from the work, though she eventually returned to it.<sup>4</sup>

Zachmeyer and Bunce were also concerned about the effects Harvey would have on undocumented immigrants, and the second point of the response was meant to assist them. “There [were] rumors of ICE and Border Patrol coming around to shelters and donation points and targeting undocumented folks,” said Bunce, “and obviously this put a lot of fear into the undocumented community.” However, most of the Houston DSA only spoke English and, thus, had little opportunity to make direct contacts with undocumented people. They got in touch with a local organization that works with the undocumented, and at the first post-Harvey meeting of the Houston DSA’s general body they advanced a proposal to donate \$30,000 to that organization, which overwhelmingly passed.<sup>5</sup>

The third and final part of the DSA’s relief plan was direct labor. After purchasing tools and supplies, volunteer teams went out every weekend — and some weekdays — to perform muck and gut work on the homes of anyone who asked for help. They were joined by DSA members from around the country.<sup>6</sup>

Zachmeyer and Bunce were lucky enough to avoid the direct effects of the storm, but through their muck and gut work they saw its devastation firsthand. One of the first people Zachmeyer helped was a member of her union. His home “was already in really bad condition before [Harvey] happened.” It had flooded during Tropical Storm Allison

in 2001, and he had never been able to get it adequately repaired. He had hired someone at the time, but they did a substandard job, leaving him with no choice but to live with it. Zachmeyer was horrified at what she called “disaster capitalism.” The DSA did the best it could to restore his home to livable condition.<sup>7</sup>

The house next door to that one also left an impression on Zachmeyer. It was a rental, so the DSA had less legal latitude to work on it directly, but they tried to help the family — multiple adult siblings and their elderly mother — as best they could. One sibling had breathing difficulties before the home flooded, and now the mold was making things worse for him. Despite this, he refused to go to a shelter, citing how traumatic it was when he lived in one after Hurricane Katrina. Bunce was also affected by what he observed. “Before the storm [people] were already on the edge, and then the storm came and just threw them over.” He remembered an elderly woman who suffered roof damage during the storm. Her home was already in bad shape, and now she had no place to sleep.<sup>8</sup>

The relatively small, all-volunteer membership of the Houston DSA was limited in what they could do. “We’re not contractors. We also don’t have a full-time team like other organizations do,” Bunce pointed out. Many of those who had specialty skills went to work with other organizations. All in all, Bunce and Zachmeyer said, they did what they could with the skills and resources they had.<sup>9</sup>

As time passed, it became harder for them to find people in need of their help. Though the city’s recovery was far from complete, the DSA’s limited presence in Houston meant that they eventually ran out of people who knew about them. In early 2019, about a year and a half after Hurricane Harvey, the Houston DSA officially shuttered its muck and gut program. The tools and the truck were donated to individuals in need.<sup>10</sup>

Both Zachmeyer and Bunce noted that this relief work came with an opportunity cost; as Zachmeyer put it, “Before [Harvey], we had been working on Medicare for All. ... Whenever we would do a Medicare for All canvas, members would have to choose, ‘Do I want to go do muck and gut? Or do I want to go do a Medicare for All canvas?’”<sup>11</sup> They both also expressed regret that they did not use it as a springboard for a political education campaign. Nevertheless, both were proud of what they accomplished.

In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, people across Houston found ways they could aid the people around them. Political activists and community organizers were no exception. Like churches or charities, they saw reaching out as part of their mission — a chance to put their ideals into practice. Though they were never on the front page of a newspaper nor mentioned on the evening news, they did their best to aid their city.

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*Houston DSA completed the muck and gut work so homeowners could begin repairs.*