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HOUSTON HOCKEY COMMUNITY RALLIED TO HELP IN HARVEY'S WAKE

By Heather Rule - Special to USA Hockey , 09/14/17, 11:15AM MDT

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It's hurricane season in the Atlantic, and weather is at the forefront of everyone's mind.

Hurricane Irma grabbed headlines of late, but Houston is still dealing with the aftermath of Harvey, which hit Texas at the end of August. The Houston hockey community has used the sport to re-establish a bit of normalcy, while others have rallied around them.

"You play other teams and associations, and sometimes things get a little bit competitive on the ice," said Karen Fraser, president of the Houston Wild Hockey Club. "But when something really awful and disastrous happens, people come together and they just want to know how they can help.

"It was pretty incredible, to say the least."

The Dallas Stars hold an annual tournament on Labor Day weekend — the Texas Shootout — one where the Houston youth traveling teams attend to determine their levels for the season. But once Harvey hit, Fraser said, it “kind of threw a little bit of a kink” in the plans to participate.

“We thought about just pulling the plug on the tournament for all our teams,” Fraser said.

Most of their hockey families still wanted to participate. A lot of them were affected by the flooding but still wanted their kids to get away for a weekend and do something normal, Fraser said.

Eight of the nine Houston teams went to the tournament, with the 18U team staying behind to help with the storm-related efforts.

Even with the flooding, there wasn’t much need for hockey equipment for them.

“It was almost kind of funny because they’re hockey people, and they put their equipment on high ground,” she said.

A company from out east donated jerseys for the tournament, since the hurricane delayed their arrival, according to Fraser.

At the tournament, the Dallas Stars asked their hockey community to bring cleaning supplies, masks, etc. — things people in Houston could use for the clean-up — to the collection bins. A father from Houston rented a U-Haul to bring them back to the city.

There have been localized efforts to help, too. People have dropped off hockey equipment at the rinks for anyone who may need it, according to TC Lewis, general manager of the Aerodrome Ice Skating Complex and Rocky Mountain District director with USA Hockey.

Fraser was overwhelmed with the caring and helpful response from the hockey community. She set up a Facebook page where people could express their needs.

Lewis was also impressed by the mobilization he saw within the hockey community. He estimates the hockey community in Houston is roughly 1,000 adults and 1,000 youth.

“The outpouring was way bigger than we thought,” Lewis said.

In addition to supplies, people can donate through a fundraiser set up by Hockey Has Heart, a non-profit that gives financial assistance to hockey families facing life-altering situations. Their board approved a special fundraiser to help Houston hockey families. The fundraiser on hockeyhasheart.org goes through Sept. 17.

As for the damage in Houston, the hockey rinks “fared exceedingly well,” Lewis said, with no problems at his rinks and minimal flooding at three other rinks in the city.

“The shocking part is how much flooding was in the city and how all the rinks escaped the flooding piece,” Lewis said.

With the sand-based rinks, Lewis was concerned about two things: Flooding and losing power. They actually had an employee stay at the rink for four days when the storm hit in case the power went out. Even when the power comes back, the rink would still need to have the compressors manually restarted, according to Lewis.

Rinks haven’t flooded in the past, Lewis said, but Harvey got close. A nearby YMCA a tenth of a mile away was flooded with three feet of water in its main level, according to Lewis.

All the rinks were closed through Tuesday or Wednesday the weekend after the lingering storm hit, according to Lewis. Aerodrome had a soft opening the subsequent Thursday for public skating and a drop-in league, so league members didn’t feel obligated to play if they weren’t able to get there, Lewis said. They had to cancel a game more than a week after the storm and weren’t back on a regular hockey schedule until Sept. 5.

The biggest issue in the aftermath is getting around town, Lewis said. As of the end of last week, homes were still underwater, roads are still closed, including a main artery in Houston that took on 16 feet of water. The drive time to get to the rink was about triple the normal time.

Lewis has noticed the resiliency of the hockey community as well.

“Even those that were impacted have found a way to, it seems like particularly the kids, maybe less with the adults ... they want to get life back to normalcy for the kids’ sake,” Lewis said. “There is a sense that we’re slowly getting back to normal.”

Story from Red Line Editorial, Inc.



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