



# Houston Methadone Clinics Reopen After Harvey's Flooding


By [REBECCA HERSHER \(/PEOPLE/REBECCA-HERSHER\)](#) · SEP 6, 2017

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*The shelter at Houston's Convention Center, seen here Aug. 29, isn't equipped to provide medication-assisted treatment for opioid abuse.*

AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Listen

Medical workers in Houston are dealing with a secondary problem after last week's floods: Clinics that offer methadone and other opioid addiction therapies are just getting back up and running, and many people don't have access to the treatments they need.

While the city flooded last week, Stormy Trout was going through opioid withdrawal at a detox center surrounded by water. "You know, cravings and anxiety, it's just treacherous, it really is," she said Tuesday while waiting for a ride outside an opioid treatment clinic in north Houston. "I'm like, I know I can do this, but I just need something to help with the cravings and the anxiety and stuff."

That something is methadone. But she had to wait until Tuesday to start taking that maintenance medication, which a patient has to take daily. Clinics all over the region that dispense methadone, buprenorphine and other drug treatments for people addicted to opioids were cut off or flooded themselves most of the week.

The one she went to, called Texas Clinic, was stranded by water for days. Director Farrukh Shamsi says he made sure someone was working there every day of the storm. And it's a good thing he did, because some people who rely on methadone to function did extraordinary things to get there.

"They were very creative," Shamsi says. "We had people who parked five miles away and walked. They started early in the morning, got here late, we medicated them, and then they walked all the way back to their cars so they could get back home."

He says Houston is a gateway for illicit drugs, including heroin. That all changed after Hurricane Harvey hit. "What the storm did is it caused the illegal drug supply to get shut off," Shamsi says. "So it's a good thing, actually, in a way, silver lining in a cloud." He's hoping it's encouraged people to opt for medication-assisted treatment instead of using illicit drugs.

His clinic is now trying to get back to its normal schedule while also helping people still living in shelters.

On Tuesday morning, the mental health team at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston arrived to find a line of about 20 people. "These are evacuees who are coming off of drugs for the first time or they've been in and out of recovery before, and they've been using this whole time and now are really, truly detoxing," says Crystal Collier, a psychologist with the Council on Recovery (<https://www.councilonrecovery.org/>), who's been volunteering in the big shelters for days.

Public shelters generally don't prescribe opioid treatments on site. It's partly because people need to be screened relatively carefully to make sure they're getting the right therapy. So Collier and her colleagues are helping people get connected with treatment at a clinic. The first step is helping them get IDs.

"I mean, so many people showed up with just what they had in their hands because it happened so quickly," Collier says." So we're having to help people get their birth certificate or Social Security card before we can actually get them into a treatment system because we have to know who they are."

The next challenge, Collier says, will be helping people who are uprooted and traumatized find the stability they need to avoid relapsing.

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DAVID GREENE, HOST:

We are closely tracking a record-breaking Hurricane Irma, the most powerful Atlantic Ocean storm ever recorded. And we're still learning about the impact from Harvey in Texas and Louisiana. The health care system has certainly been disrupted there. As NPR's Rebecca Hersher reports, clinics that offer methadone and other opioid-addiction therapies are just getting back up and running.

REBECCA HERSHER, BYLINE: Stormy Trout is waiting for a ride, sitting on a hot curb outside an opioid treatment clinic in north Houston.

STORMY TROUT: You know, cravings and anxiety, like, it's just treacherous. It really is.

HERSHER: As the city flooded last week, Trout was going through opioid withdrawal at a detox center surrounded by water.

TROUT: I'm like, I know I can do this, but I just need something to help with the cravings, and the anxiety and stuff.

HERSHER: That something is methadone. But she had to wait until Tuesday to start. Clinics all over the region that dispense methadone, buprenorphine and other drug treatments for people addicted to opioids were cut off or flooded themselves for most of the week. The one she went to, called Texas Clinic, was stranded by water for days. Now they're cleaning the carpets and playing strangely appropriate music in the waiting room.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "GOOD LOVIN'")

THE RASCALS: (Singing) I asked my family doctor just what I had.

HERSHER: Farrukh Shamsi is the director. He made sure someone was there every day of the storm - and good thing. Some people who rely on methadone to function did extraordinary things to get there.

FARRUKH SHAMSI: They were very creative. We had people that parked five miles away and walked. They started in the morning. They got here really late. We medicated them. Then they were going to walk all the way back to their car so they could get back home.

HERSHER: He says Houston is a gateway for illicit drugs, including heroin. And anecdotally, he's seeing something unexpected after the storm.

SHAMSI: What the storm did - it is caused the illegal drug network supply to be shut off. It could not get here, right? So the best thing to do is, why not try something legal? And so this is a good thing, actually, in a way, a silver lining in a cloud - is that people could actually come in here, and get treatment for the first time, and make their lives better and actually get off of drugs when they were maybe thinking about it, but now they're forced to get off of drugs.

HERSHER: Shamsi says this week is a recovery week for his clinic - being fully open, trying to get back to a more normal schedule and handling patients who come from the shelters that are still open.

On Tuesday morning, the mental health team at the George R. Brown Convention Center arrived to find a line of about 20 people.

CRYSTAL COLLIER: These are evacuees who are coming off of drugs for the first time or they've been in and out of recovery before, and they've been using this whole time and now are really, truly detoxing.

HERSHER: Dr. Crystal Collier is a psychologist with The Council on Recovery who's been volunteering at the big shelters for days. She says, for people struggling with opioid addiction who are flooded out of their homes, the shelters can only do so much.

COLLIER: If you're detoxing, or if you need to get a Suboxone treatment or methadone treatments, it's going to be impossible to get it at a shelter.

HERSHER: That's because public shelters generally don't prescribe opioid treatments on site. It's partly because people need to be screened relatively carefully to make sure they're getting the right therapy.

COLLIER: I mean, so many people just showed up with what they had in their hands because it happened so quickly. And so we're having to help people get their birth certificate, or Social Security or a card before we can actually get them into a treatment system because we got to have proof of who they are.

HERSHER: Collier says the next challenge will be helping people who are uprooted and traumatized find the stability they need to avoid relapsing. Rebecca Hersher, NPR News, Houston.


(SOUNDBITE OF TACOMA NARROWS BRIDGE DISASTER'S "TWENTY") Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.

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