West Begins Post-Explosion Recovery

NOMAAN MERCHANT, Associated Press

WEST, Texas (AP) — From money, food and clothing to new appliances and crews armed with chain saws, help is pouring into the tiny Texas town where a fertilizer plant exploded.

Brittany Ross, wife of Texas Rangers pitcher Robbie Ross, and Fox 4 Southwest's Liddy Bisanz, help load Items collected over the weekend by the Rangers and Rangers fans for victims the West fertilizer plant disaster on Tuesday, April 23, 2013. **(AP Photo/The Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Joyce Marshall)**

As the donations come in, how long and how much it will take for West to come back aren't yet known. Residents have just started burying the 14 people who died in last week's blast and some don't yet know what happened to their homes. They're struggling to replace missing medications and documents. Others are just starting to work with insurance companies to figure out how much money they'll get for repairs.

The explosion last Wednesday at West Fertilizer left a crater more than 90 feet wide and blasted the walls and windows off dozens of buildings in the town of 2,700.

Nickole Hayes' family is among those who lived closest to the blast who haven't yet been allowed back into their homes. Hayes and her family are living in a home offered by a doctor in nearby Hillsboro. She said she was thankful for others' generosity, including a donated washer and dryer that came just as the family was needing clean clothes. She said she had insurance on her home, which is a few hundred yards from the blast site, but adjusters had not been able to survey it yet.

"We still have plenty of things to work out," Hayes said Tuesday.

Around town, trucks carrying food and bottled water have become a familiar sight.

City officials are running out of room to store the items people are sending. A federal emergency declaration allowed up to $5 million in federal assistance to be given to the state, which can give the money to local agencies for such things as shoring up damaged structures, emergency repairs and demolition and even barricades.

"This falls under public assistance, which is more infrastructure," said Federal Emergency Management Agency spokeswoman Stephanie Moffett. "That's what the focus is on and what is included in this particular declaration."

State investigators have not yet reached a damage estimate in dollars. "It's too early," said Josh Havens, a spokesman for Texas Gov. Rick Perry.

At the outer edges of the blast zone, residents have been allowed back to collect belongings. Insurance adjusters and crews to board up homes and start the cleanup are on their way.

"It's starting, and it'll get bigger and bigger as we go, but we want to do it in stages," said Steve Vanek, the city's mayor pro tempore. "We don't want an influx all at one time."

Vanek has been able to return to his home and said he's seen repair trucks and insurance adjusters come through as the process of rebuilding began. He's renting a house on the outskirts of West in the meantime.

The Red Cross and about 30 other agencies established a joint assistance center at a Knights of Columbus hall north of the plant. Inside one building were dozens of tables with lawyers, insurance officials and nurses.

Jan George, a volunteer from Bonita Springs, Fla., said the Red Cross will offer people money for one month's rent and a security deposit. Gift cards to buy other necessities are also available, she said.

"We want to tell them it's a gift from the American people," she said. "It's not welfare. And everybody needs help sometimes."

Meanwhile, at the St. Mary's Catholic Church of the Assumption, south of the blast site, the family of Mariano C. Saldivar held one of the first of several funerals scheduled for this week. Saldivar was inside his apartment when the nearby fertilizer plant exploded.

A native of Mexico, Saldivar had retired to West after working in the warehousing industry in California, according to the funeral home that arranged the service. More than 100 people attend his funeral service Tuesday.

A choir used acoustic guitars and a harmonica to perform Spanish-language songs. The Rev. Ed Karasek, speaking in both Spanish and English, talked about Saldivar's smile and a graying moustache similar to his own.

"He was always, every Sunday noon, at Mass with his wife and daughter," Karasek told mourners. "At the end of Mass, he was in his wheelchair, surrounded by his daughter. He was a faithful and loving husband and father."

A memorial service for first responders is scheduled for Thursday at a basketball arena in nearby Waco. President Barack Obama is expected to attend what one organizer, Joe Ondrasek, called a "Texas-style send-off."

Investigators are still working at the site of West Fertilizer, said Robert Champion, the Dallas office chief of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Finding out what sparked the blaze and where it began will likely take several more days. Officials did rule out a rail car carrying ammonium nitrate that some speculated could have caused the explosion, assistant state fire marshal Kelly Kistner said.

"This is much like an archaeological dig that we're going through," Kistner said.

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Associated Press writers Michael Graczyk in Houston and Juan Carlos Llorca in El Paso contributed to this report.

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