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## LOCAL

# Most East Tennesseans don't have flood insurance. What other options exist post-Helene?



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Knoxville News Sentinel

Oct. 7, 2024, 5:10 a.m. ET

Most Tennesseans don't have flood insurance. In any direction you look, there's at least one state between Tennessee and the ocean.

But on Sept. 27, as the state's rivers raged through East Tennessee communities, the disaster highlighted the fragility of the state's insurance infrastructure. Rebuilding is a long road ahead, and affected communities are still in the early stages of clean up, debris removal and [restoring utilities](#).

Eventually, homes, businesses, bridges and roads will need to be rebuilt.

Statewide, 27,500 properties are covered by the national flood insurance program - a drop in the bucket compared to the 2.5 million properties statewide that are not covered, according to [data from the Federal Emergency Management Agency](#).

In the eight East Tennessee counties most affected by Hurricane Helene, only 2,173 out of [255,431 housing units](#) are insured. That means [less than 1% are covered](#).

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## What is the national flood insurance program?

The [program](#) is managed by FEMA and is operated by a network of more than 50 insurance companies and the [NFIP Direct](#). Most homeowners' insurance does not

cover flood damage, and flood insurance is a separate policy that can cover buildings, belongings or both.

Just one inch of floodwater can cause up to \$25,000 in damage, according to FEMA.

By the morning of Sept. 28, the town of Busick, North Carolina, near Mount Mitchell, had received [more than 30 inches of rain](#). Rainfall across North Carolina [broke records](#) as Helene traveled north after [battering Florida's Big Bend region](#) as a Category 4 hurricane.

Some counties in East Tennessee absorbed [more than 10 inches of rain](#) Sept. 26-27. In a normal year, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park receives [between 55 inches and 85 inches](#) of rain total, depending on elevation.

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## What does homeowners' insurance cover?

Damage caused by wind, wind-driven rain, trees or other falling objects is typically covered under most standard homeowners' policies, according to the [Tennessee Department of Commerce and Insurance](#).

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## What does homeowners' insurance not cover?

Interior water damage from storms when there is no damage to the roof or walls of your home, damage from a flood, removal of fallen trees (if the trees don't land on and damage your home), food spoilage due to power outage and water damage from backed-up drains or sewers are not commonly covered by homeowners' insurance policies.

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## What resources do uninsured Tennesseans have?

East Tennessee residents whose homes were [damaged by Hurricane Helene](#) can apply for federal disaster assistance to help pay for temporary housing, home

repairs, medical expenses or other disaster related needs.

The [financial aid](#) provided by FEMA is intended to support recovery efforts for those affected by the storm's severe weather and flooding.

Residents of Carter, Cocke, Greene, Hamblen, Hawkins, Johnson, Unicoi and Washington counties who were affected by Hurricane Helene can apply for disaster relief through FEMA. Frank Matranga, FEMA's director of individual assistance, urged those affected to apply as soon as possible to expedite the process and ensure they receive help quickly.

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## What does FEMA cover?

The amount of financial assistance available from FEMA varies based on the needs and eligibility of the applicant. For 2024, the maximum amounts are \$42,500 for housing assistance and \$42,500 for other needs assistance.

Once you apply, it takes about 10 days for FEMA to review the application, make a decision and issue funds.

- FEMA's Individuals and Households Program provides financial assistance and direct services such as home repairs and temporary housing, along with other disaster-related needs.
  - A FEMA crisis payment, or Immediate Needs Assistance, is another form of financial help for people and households affected by Hurricane Helene. It can help with immediate needs such as food, diapers, medical care or other necessities after a disaster.
  - For homeowners, FEMA can provide grants for home repairs or funds towards replacement of the primary residence if the property was damaged or destroyed by a disaster event.
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## How to apply for FEMA assistance

Applying for assistance can be done in a few ways:

- **Online:** Individuals can apply for disaster assistance by visiting [DisasterAssistance.gov](https://DisasterAssistance.gov). The website allows users to create an account, submit an application and track the status of their claim.
- **By phone:** Applications can be made by calling FEMA's toll-free helpline at 1-800-621-3362 (TTY: 1-800-462-7585 for those with hearing impairments). The helpline operates 7 a.m.-11 p.m. ET daily and provides assistance with the application process.

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## Homeowners, businesses and private nonprofits can apply for federal loans

Residents in Carter, Cocke, Greene, Johnson, Sevier and Unicoi counties also can apply to the [U.S. Small Business Administration](https://www.sba.gov) for disaster loans, which are low-interest, long-term loans. The interest rates can be as low as 2.81% for individuals and 4% for businesses over a 30-year period.

Homeowners can apply for loans of up to \$500,000 for home replacement or primary repairs. Both renters and homeowners are eligible for loans of up to \$100,000 to pay for personal property repair or replacement.

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## What is the state doing to help?

The Tennessee Department of Commerce and Insurance's [Commissioner Carter Lawrence](#) requested licensed insurance providers to give affected customers a 60-day grace period for those who have suffered property damage, injuries or loss of life.

The grace period is not a waiver of fee-payment but just a delay to help in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane.

In this, Lawrence requested insurance policies not be cancelled for missing payments, and one early or replacement refill for medication per prescription.

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