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# NC utilities can cut off customers despite Helene hardships. Watchdog group asks why.

BY JOE MARUSAK jmarusak@charlotteobserver.com

Gov. Roy Cooper included no provision in his statewide Tropical Storm Helene executive order to bar utilities from disconnecting residents who are behind on their bills unlike his mandate during

the COVID-19 pandemic. The North Carolina **Utilities Commission also** has enacted no such protections, unlike its orders during the pandemic. On Oct. 7, due to He-

lene, Georgia Power announced it was suspending disconnections and waiving late fees until at least Dec. 15 for residential and business customers. In North Carolina, Duke Energy has made no such

public announcement. The lack of action by Cooper and utility regulators in North Carolina concerns a utility watch-

dog group. "While many residents are in recovery mode and trying to put their lives back together, a constant threat haunts some: losing utilities again," Sue Sturgis, a North Carolinabased researcher with the

nonprofit Energy and

email to The Charlotte

Observer. At least 100,000 North Carolinians rely on electricity for their medical and assistive equipment and devices, she said.

Policy Institute, said in an

#### **ANY CUSTOMER CAN BE CUT OFF, WATCHDOG GROUP SAYS**

During COVID, Cooper prohibited providers of electricity, gas, water and wastewater services from disconnecting customers and collecting fees, penalties and or interest for late payments.

Cooper's COVID mandate lasted 60 days and gave residential customers at least six months to pay outstanding bills, Sturgis said. His mandate followed a North Carolina **Utilities Commission** order that suspended disconnections for non-

payment. "Why aren't North Carolina's utility regulators and its largest utility doing unable to resolve the isthe same for people affected by disaster?" Sturgis asked.

Cooper's press office didn't respond to four email and phone messages from the Observer over the past week.

Duke Energy and other utilities can still disconnect "any customer with a balance, despite the state of emergency that's still in effect," Sturgis said.

#### **DUKE IS WAIVING** DISCONNECTIONS, **OFFICIAL SAYS**

Sam Watson, general counsel for the state utility commission, said several utilities, including Duke

Energy, are voluntarily waiving disconnection and late fees, among other measures, for customers

in Helene-affected areas. Customers in need of relief from their bills should first contact their utility, Watson said. If the person they talk with is sue, ask for their supervisor, he said.

Public Staff Consumer Services Division at 919-733-9277 or 866-380-9816 or via email at consumer.services@psncuc.gov. By Tuesday, Duke Energy had restored power to all but 6,500 customers in

If necessary, Watson

said, contact the state's

the Carolinas and to all but 2,221 by Wednesday afternoon, according to the company outage map, down from more than 2.5 million. Power was restored to

all customers in the hardhit mountain county of Buncombe, which in-

cludes Asheville, the outage map showed. Still, after the deadly

wildfires on the island of Maui in 2023, Hawaii's **Public Utilities Commis**sion ordered disconnections suspended, Sturgis said.

"Hawaii's largest utility, Hawaii Electric, even publicly announced its moratorium on disconnections," she said. "Why aren't North Carolina's utility regulators and its largest utility doing the same for people affected by disaster?"

"The North Carolina **Utilities Commission and** the Public Staff know about Duke Energy's voluntary suspension of disconnections and late fees,' Sturgis said. "But how are the people struggling to rebuild their lives in disaster-stricken Western North Carolina supposed

to know about the policy?" "There's been no public announcement by the company or by any state agency," she said. "Duke Energy has repeatedly said it's committed to customer outreach, but it's failing to offer any information up front about the disconnection suspension."

"Compare this with Georgia Power's an-

nouncement via press release that it suspended disconnections and late fees through at least Dec. 15 for people affected by Helene," she said.

### "ALWAYS HERE TO

**ASSIST CUSTOMERS**" Regarding customers who can't pay their outstanding bills due to Helene, "we are taking a flexible, personal approach to working with those that are facing financial hardships," Duke Energy spokesman Jeff Brooks said in a statement for this story.

"Those in the heavily impacted areas of upstate SC and western NC will be extended the flexibility needed to help them through this difficult time," Brooks said.

"We're always here to assist our customers," he

said. Customers without power are in the "harder and hardest hit areas," Brooks said. "So, these would be places that we are doing more rebuilding of infrastructure than repair. Some areas have been completely devastated, and all infrastructure is being rebuilt."

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## How many people has Tropical Storm Helene killed in NC? How many remain missing?

BY ADAM WAGNER

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**Tropical Storm Helene** has caused 95 confirmed deaths in North Carolina, Gov. Roy Cooper said at a Tuesday press conference. And almost as many, 92,

**Buncombe County has** had the most

with 42. Yancey County has had 11 confirmed deaths; Henderson County has had seven; and Haywood County has had five, the N.C. Department of Health and Human Serv-

ices said Tuesday. "The vast majority of these are directly related to flooding leading to landslides, blunt force,

detailed review of death records on other specific causes and elements," **DHHS Secretary Kody** Kinsley said.

Drowning is the leading cause of death, with 20. That's followed by landslides and blunt force injuries, each of which are confirmed to have killed 11 people, and trauma from wind or tree, which killed six people, according to

DHHS.

The state has established a task force that is working with local law enforcement officials to investigate cases of people who are still unaccounted for.

As part of that effort, the N.C. Department of Public Safety is working to consolidate reports about missing people that may have come into a number

of state, local or nonprofit agencies.

Working with local agencies, state officials are following up with people who reported a missing person to see if that person has been located.

Cooper warned that the number of people missing is likely to fluctuate, with people being both added and removed as more cases are uncovered or

resolved.

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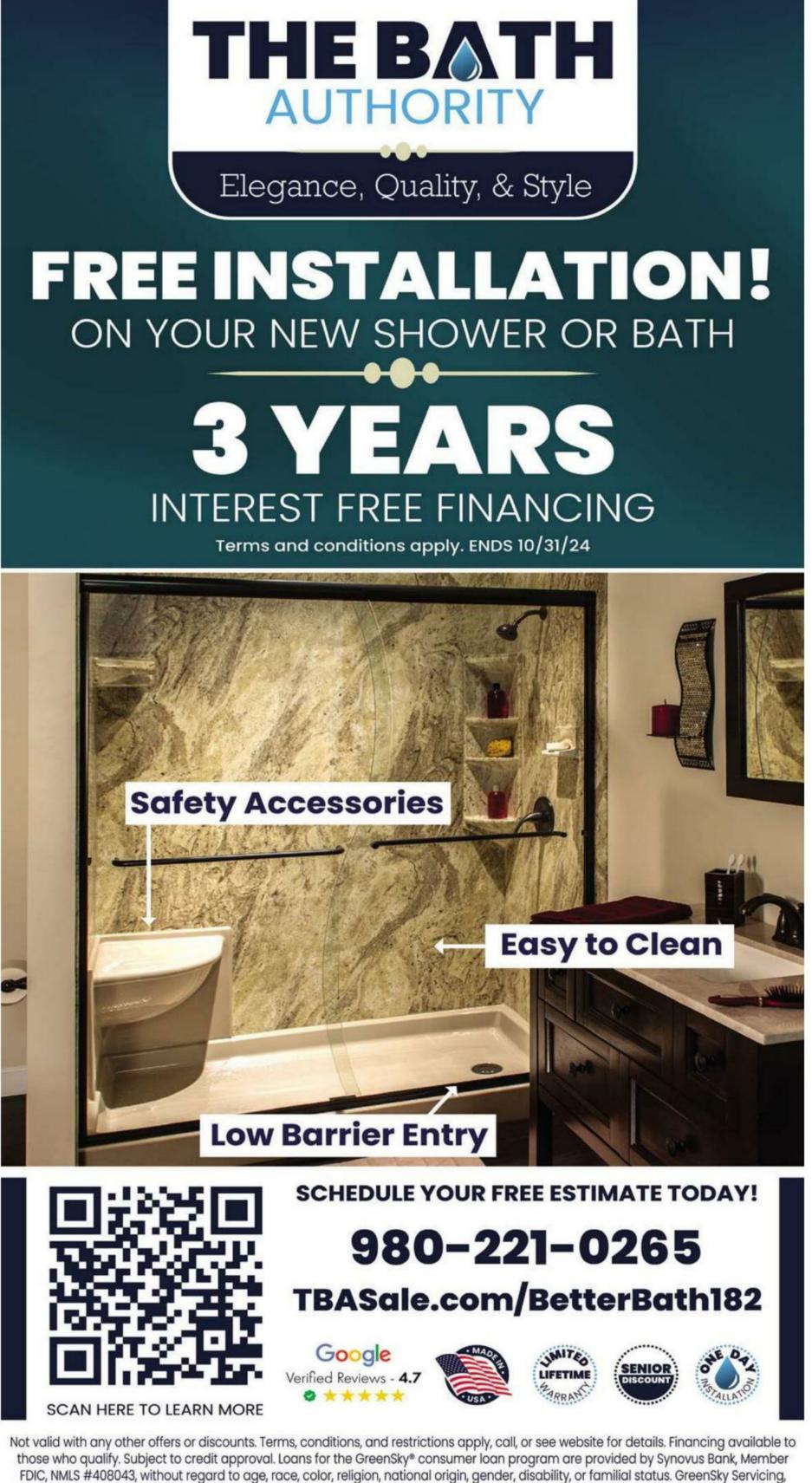
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