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FEMA official, Cooper say disinformation harms Helene effort

BY ADAM WAGNER

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Disinformation and misinformation are harming the ability of storm-battered communities in Western North Carolina to receive federal aid at the time they need it most, Gov. Roy Cooper and FEMA Administrator Deanna Criswell said this week.

The remarks come after a man was arrested and charged with going armed to the terror of the public after allegedly roaming Rutherford County and saying he was going to harm FEMA workers. Criswell decided to pause door-to-door canvassing efforts in the area, which have since resumed.

"Frankly, it's heartbreaking to see words or acts of hatred toward anyone,

let alone federal responders who are here to help people in this critical time. So let me be clear: I take these threats seriously and the safety of these responders is, and will remain, a priority for me and my team," Criswell said.

As of Tuesday morning, FEMA had approved more than 77,000 applications for its Individual Assistance program in the Helene-impacted counties, with survivors receiving more than \$99 million. More than 171,000 people have applied for aid, said Lucas Hitt, a FEMA spokesman.

Cooper pointed to the storm happening about a month before an election as a key reason for the volume of inaccurate and outright false information that has been spread about the storm and response.

"Candidates are using people's misery

to sow chaos for their own political objectives, and it's wrong. This is a time where we all need to pull together to help the people of Western North Carolina and it's disappointing when candidates, knowing full well what they're doing, are continuing this kind of disinformation filled with lies," Cooper said Tuesday.

Disinformation is the intentional spread of false or misleading information, while misinformation is false information shared without intent.

Former President Donald Trump, the Republican nominee for president, has singled out Cooper, a Democrat, for criticism. Trump has amplified false claims that Cooper and President Joe Biden have "gone out of their way" to

SEE HELENE, 7A

NC journalist plays dual role in response to Helene

BY SCOTT FOWLER

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Many journalists have covered the damage that Hurricane Helene wrought in Western North Carolina when it devastated much of the area in late September.

Very few of them, though, have had to make the same sorts of choices that 25-year-old Moss Brennan has.

Brennan is the editor of the Watauga Democrat in Boone, where

he supervises three other staff writers and several freelance photographers and also helps oversee the publication of four other neighboring community newspapers.

Meanwhile, Brennan also serves as a volunteer firefighter for two local rescue units in the Boone area — the Deep Gap Fire Department and the Watauga County Rescue Squad.

"I have my rescue hat and my journalism hat," Brennan, a 2021 graduate of Appalachian State, said in a phone interview. "And I try to keep them as separate as possible."

That has proved challenging over the past couple of weeks. Hurricane Helene caused mayhem all over Western North Carolina. Brennan found himself wanting to help in two disparate ways — getting important information to the public through the newspaper and its various social media platforms and literally helping to save lives as a first responder.

In the first few hours and days of the storm, as Helene downed trees, flooded rivers, provoked landslides, knocked out power and caused dozens of deaths in Western North Carolina, Brennan stuck mostly with his volunteer work on the rescue units. He participated in several swift-water rescues, helping get people and animals out of cars that were stuck in floodwaters or out of houses where the water had risen too high for a safe exit.

"On those swift-water calls," Brennan said, "I was part of rescuing 11 people and three dogs."

Then it came time to put out the newspaper — or actually multiple newspapers, since Brennan is also the executive editor of Mountain Times Publications. The company owns community newspapers in neighboring counties like Ashe and Avery, too. All of the publications combined — there are five of them altogether — have a staff of nine full-time journalists. Most of those reporters are in their 20s, Brennan said.

Brennan is most closely associated with the Watauga Democrat, which he

SEE JOURNALIST, 6A



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Active-duty soldiers from Fort Liberty place ice and cleaning supplies into the car of a resident affected by Hurricane Helene at Mitchell Elementary/Middle School in Bakersville on Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2024.

How the military is helping with recovery from Helene

BY CATHERINE MUCCIGROSSO

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The welcoming mountains of Western North Carolina was where Robert Arndt grew up. And after the deadly Hurricane Helene pummeled the area, he knew he had to do something, anything, to help.

"Nanny's house is completely destroyed," Arndt said last week. His great-grandmother's house was in Clyde, halfway between his hometown of Sylva and Asheville. She's safe and staying with family in Sylva nearly an hour west of Asheville. "A house is replaceable. A life isn't," Arndt said.

He's among 1,300 soldiers with the 20th Engineer Brigade mobilized to the mountains for recovery relief. The brigade includes soldiers from Fort Liberty (formerly Bragg), where Arndt is based,

as well as Fort Meade in Maryland and Fort Campbell in Kentucky.

The job is personal to the 22-year-old, whose family also lives in towns like Canton and Waynesville, all hammered by the storm and within the 27 counties designated as major disaster areas.

"They need more hands, more workers, more engineers to help clear the roads or build them, or help get supplies to people who can't get out of their houses," Arndt said.

Helene's deadly path of destruction tore through 300 miles inland from the coast. "It hurts me," Arndt said. "It's something you can't really prepare for up in the mountains."

To get a first-hand look at what the soldiers were doing to assist hurricane victims in the mountains, a Charlotte Observer reporter and visuals journalist spent a 12-hour day embedded with the

Army last Wednesday. Here's what we saw and heard.

'THANK YOU FOR COMING!'

It's just after 8 a.m. Dozens of small camouflage-colored tents line the front of a large pavilion turned logistics center at Camping World RV Sales in Marion, about 100 miles northwest of Charlotte.

It's muddy and it's loud, with an army of vehicles revved to go.

After being handed three-pound Kevlar helmets, we climbed up a four-step metal ladder into the open-air 5-ton Light Medium Tactical Vehicle alongside seven soldiers on metal benches. We were followed by a medic truck.

Our destination: school distribution centers in Spruce Pine.

SEE MILITARY, 6A



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