

News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC): Page 9

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EDITORIAL: State's Rainy Day Fund, a success in self reliance

October 13, 2024 | Carteret County News-Times, The (Morehead City, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Opinions | 1121 Words
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Wednesday's unanimous decision by the N.C. Legislature to pass H.B. 149, the Disaster Recovery Act of 2024, allocating \$273 million from the state's Rainy Day Fund for disaster relief for the communities damaged by Hurricane Helene and Potential Tropical Cyclone #8, (PTC8) highlights the farsighted approach the state's legislative leadership in banking surplus revenues in the state's Funding Reserve. But the level of destruction caused by these storms and the anticipated growing cost of reconstruction should move the legislature to become even more aggressive in financing its rainy day emergency fund.

In 2017, faced with growing budget surpluses, additional funds that some legislators wanted to use for on-going state programs, the legislature's conservative leadership opted instead to strengthen the state's eponymously named 'Rainy Day Fund.' The plans were roundly criticized by some less fiscally concerned legislators who saw the budget surpluses as extra money to expand state programs, while giving a cursory nod to the need for emergency funds. After all, it was believed that the federal government, Uncle Sam, would be available to cover any significant losses.

But that, as we are learning with comments from Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, whose department is responsible for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the federal government's disaster relief funds are not a sure thing.

Deanne Criswell, FEMA Administrator, told the media during a White House briefing last week regarding the recovery needs for Hurricane Helene victims, that the federal government had spent nearly half the disaster relief funds allocated by Congress within the first eight days of current fiscal year. "I'm going to have to evaluate how quickly we're burning the remaining dollars in Disaster Relief Funds," she stated.

In a Politico article, reporters Thomas Frank and Anne C. Mulkern noted that federal spending restrictions could result in FEMA cutting off funding for disaster-related rebuilding projects, focusing instead on life-saving operations. The reporters go on to note that before Hurricanes Helene and Milton were even being considered for response, Criswell had begun to anticipate imposing restrictions at the end of the year. Now, because of the expected financial demands resulting from the two most recent hurricanes, she may not be able to wait that long.

What is particularly galling about this dilemma is that a large amount of FEMA's funding has been directed by the Biden-Harris administration to house, feed and provide medical care for the ten plus million illegals (new arrivals according to the liberal elite) who have crossed our borders in the past three years, ostensibly to seek asylum. The fact that these "new arrivals" were not stopped at the border for not having followed normal entry procedures raises serious questions about the administration's intent.

But regardless of the intent, federal tax dollars are being used for the benefit of people who have not contributed to the program and are here illegally. All the while, the legal taxpayers are fearing that their government is both unsympathetic and ignoring the needs of disaster victims.

In response to this concern, Secretary Mayorkas told the press that the funding provided for the illegals entering the country is coming from a "separate bucket" of funds. Dollars dedicated to disaster relief come from a separate bucket. On the contrary, all of these funds come from the same "bucket of money"- the taxpayer bucket.

It is interesting that the federal government's bucket for services provided for the "new arrivals" continues to fill with money, yet the bucket for disaster relief is quickly draining.

Of course we would be surprised if Congress doesn't find some way to keep agency afloat but there may be a lag in financial support for those who are slowly and painfully bailing out their homes and businesses after two hurricanes and a tropical cyclone. But this potential lag in financial support for rebuilding infrastructure will have serious consequences for the state and municipalities as they work to bring potable water, electricity and roadways back to operation. For North Carolina's western counties devastated by Hurricane Helene, infrastructure repair is absolutely critical for the health and wellbeing of the residents; it is not a secondary concern.

Fortunately, North Carolina's elected leaders have been far more aggressive in supporting the state's Rainy Day Fund and also thoughtful in assuring that it is not abused for pet projects, unlike the FEMA funds which have been used for apparent political purposes.

In 2017, realizing that the state's tax revenues were exceeding budgetary requirements, the Republican leadership reassessed the process for funding the state's emergency reserves. In a bipartisan vote, the legislature passed H.B. 7 mandating that at least 15% of revenue growth would go into the state's emergency fund.

The new law also set limits on the use of these funds, restricting withdrawals to no more than 7.5% of the prior year's General Fund budget to address one of four specific needs: decline in General Fund revenues; to cover gaps between the General Funds revenues and budgeted expenses; to cover court or administrative ordered costs; and most importantly, disaster or emergency relief.

The bill does allow for flexibility in both the total amount to be spent and the purpose for tapping the fund, but that requires a super majority vote, or two-thirds of the members of both chambers.

Because of the financial commitment and restrictions for use, North Carolina's Rainy Day Fund, which at the beginning of this fiscal year had a balance of \$4.75 billion, is considered one of the best in the country.

As federal, state and local officials take stock of the damage done by Helene in the state's mountain region, and by PTC8 in Brunswick and New Hanover counties, the confidence that the state will have revenues to rebuild will be important. Since there is a threat of a lag in federal support for rebuilding projects such as water systems, emergency services and roadways, all vital public services that were destroyed by the recent storms, North Carolina has the ability to bridge the funding gap to get the infrastructure projects moving. Any delay in beginning the rebuilding process will rapidly increase the human and financial costs.

Both the financial questions presented by the FEMA's lack of funding - some would argue the misuse of funds - and the expansive and costly nature of the recent storms, should get the legislature's attention for increasing the size of the state's Rainy Day Fund. While having almost \$5 billion in the bank, the state's rapidly growing population, now 10th in the nation, and the inflationary cost of materials and services, require a review of just what will be needed in future disasters.

Based on the messaging dripping out of Washington about the questionable strength of federal funds to aid in emergency relief, the one take-away for the state and municipalities is that we need to better prepare ourselves to be self-reliant.

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Lowe's, Duke Endowment donating \$27M to hurricane recovery after Helene, Milton

October 13, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Jeff A. Chamer and Catherine Muccigrosso; Staff Writer | Section: News | 325 Words

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In the wake of hurricanes Helene and Milton, Charlotte-area companies like Lowe's and nonprofit Duke Endowment are committing a combined \$27 million to recovery efforts.

Lowe's funding comes on the heels of Duke Endowment's commitment to give \$15 million to recovery efforts in the Carolinas

The private foundation named after industrialist James B. Duke said Wednesday that \$7.5 million of that money would be split between organizations- one in Western North Carolina and one in Upstate South Carolina.

The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina's Emergency and Disaster Response Fund will receive \$5 million, the foundation said.

The Central Carolina Community Foundation's One SC Fund, which works with nonprofits to provide food and housing in South Carolina, will receive \$2.5 million.

Based in Charlotte, The Duke Endowment is not related to Duke Energy or Duke University.

"It has been overwhelming to see the devastation in Western North Carolina and upstate South Carolina," said Charles C. Lucas III, chair of the foundation's board of trustees, in a press release. "Our hope is that these initial dollars will go towards addressing short-term and urgent needs for those affected. As the region transitions to recovery and rebuilding, this is the right way to start."

The other half of the \$15 million commitment will be donated as staff members from the foundation vet organizations, the press release said.

Lowe's donates \$10 million more to Helene recovery

Lowe's is adding \$10 million to the multi-state recovery efforts on top of \$2 million already announced Sept. 30, the Mooresville-based home improvement chain said in a news release Friday .

The money will be used to assist Lowe's nonprofit partners and first responders in recovery efforts, including support in Western North Carolina, the company said.

Lowe's employees also are volunteering hours and using Lowe's merchandise to help communities clear mud and debris, the company said.

Jeff A. Chamer: @jeffchamer

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'Helping the helpers': How Charlotte laundry service aids Duke Energy crews after Helene

October 13, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Chase Jordan; Staff Writer | Section: Business | 696 Words Page: 23A OpenURL Link

In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, workers from Collins Cleaners are driving a lot of miles around Charlotte picking up dirty laundry from Duke Energy crews who are working to restore power in Western North Carolina.

For owner Patrick Collins, it's not enough to just clean the clothes for the stressed-out workers. Employees are sending the laundry bags back with snacks, water, notes of encouragement and waterproof bags.

"You don't know if they're sleeping in tents for a couple of days, or whether they're going to be in a hotel or sleeping in the back of their trucks," Collins said. "This is just just a nice way to tell them how much we appreciate them for what they do."

Close to 14 drivers are picking up laundry early in the morning at hotels across Charlotte for Duke workers.

The laundry is returned later in the evening after it's cleaned through multiple wash and rinse cycles. Duke Energy workers are also dropping off clothes with trailers full of clothes to Collins Cleaners locations across Charlotte.

It's an honor, said driver Drew Nathan.

"I'm honestly feeling the urge to go up there and help and do something," Nathan said. "I know that it's probably a nuisance for me to be in the way for people actually like bringing stuff in, people that are supposed to be there."

But like many other people miles away from the devastation, Nathan is glad to be doing his part.

"I'm from North Carolina and it's a weird sense of 'helping the helpers,' " he said. "And I think that's what I felt from it."

Collins Cleaners operates from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m. with two shifts of workers. As of Tuesday, they have cleaned 13,807 pieces of clothing since the storm for 466 people from Duke Energy and other organizations.

"We've tried to put that word out because the name of the game really is to get them their clothes as best and as fast as we can," Collins said.

Drivers are also planning trips farther west to cities like Hickory, which is closer to the devastation. Collins expects the work to continue through October based on information he received about hotel bookings.

"A lot of those guys are, you know, they're traveling, and they just kind of get beat up while they're on the road," Collins said. "It can be really disheartening."

About Collins Cleaners

Collins started the business in 1992 with his wife Shelby, who serves as vice president. The valet cleaning services provides pick up and delivery services for customers, including law enforcement agencies and other organizations.

Collins Cleaners connection with Charlotte-based Duke Energy began in December 1998 after an ice storm froze much of the city Charlotte. The relationship started through the Sports Page restaurant, which shared an attached building with the cleaning business at the time. Sports Page provided catering for Duke workers during disaster

events, according to Collins.

And it's also important for Duke crews to leave with good thoughts about Charlotte, Collins added.

"For us, it's really more about just trying to give back to these guys," he said. "And also, my wife and I are from here, so we kind of consider Charlotte our town. We want people to leave here with the best impression of Charlotte they could possibly get."

Since Helene first struck Duke Energy's service territory in North Carolina, the company has continued to work with local, state and federal agencies, and numerous private businesses, to support team members in some of the hardest-hit areas of the state, according to Duke Energy spokesman Jeff Brooks.

"We greatly appreciate the support of and collaboration with these organizations and businesses as our team continue to work to rebuild the grid and restore power," Brooks said.

The faith-based business also has a relationship with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association for services. Collins has presented the idea of having mobile laundry facilities for workers in disaster areas.

But reaching people may become a challenge if destroyed roads are closed.

"There are still some things to work out," he said. "But I think that's just a little bit of the vision into the future of where things like this are going."

Chase Jordan: @ChaseJordanTCO

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When Helene crippled NC's small mountain communities, neighbors became lifelines

October 13, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Julia Coin; Staff Writer Section: News 1444 Words

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A week after Hurricane Helene brought once-in-a-century flooding to Appalachia, mountain folk pepper the cracked roads that few outsiders have navigated. They carry Pampers and Spam, water and protein bars they grabbed from the longstanding community centers - churches, fire departments, restaurants - that are now survival centers.

Disaster relief workers are in the sludgy streets, too, looking down at their frozen phone screens. Maps don't load here. Cell towers are down or overwhelmed.

Two men wearing blue and red search and rescue shirts stop in front of mangled driveways to ask for directions. They're met with first names and a finger pointing down the road.

Jimmy, up on the mountain, might need some food.

Someone should probably check on Nance again. She's one of the town's widows. Lives right over there.

Oh, Jerry, I forgot about him. If he made it, he'll need more oxygen soon.

Most volunteer group leaders give the same orders when setting up in the most rural of mountain areas between hard-hit Asheville and Hickory, a city an hour northwest of Charlotte.

Find a local. Find out what they need. Find out where to go.

When streets are shredded, rivers are relocated and forests turn into fields of logs, rescue teams can't always get to the stranded. For a few days, they don't know who the stranded are.

But neighbors do. Helene turned some small mountain towns into mostly rubbled buildings. Still, community remains.

Helene, the Category 4 hurricane that made landfall in Florida's Big Bend region, hit North Carolina as a tropical storm. But even before Helene's bands barrelled over mountaintops, Appalachia saw days of rain - 10 inches, in some places.

By Sept. 27, as Helene settled over the sloped towns, houses and Christmas tree farms that dot the region, the area became overwhelmed with floods, mudslides and log-slides.

First came rescue, now comes restoration.

Across the U.S., more than 200 have been reported dead so far in the monster storm. Some remain missing.

Sinking in mud

Logan Brown had a home near Frank, an Avery County town about 150 miles northwest of Charlotte. It perched atop a hill and had a view of the scenic Route 19E and North Toe River.

That's where the 17-year-old sat on Sept. 27. He was inside the two-story, green-shuttered house with his dad and siblings.

Then came the roaring mud.

The four escaped out the back before Helene gouged logs into the door frame and punched holes into the rest of the house.

Brown says they sat by the river, waiting for the storm to pass. Then they made it to his dad's work truck down the road. Then to his girlfriend's mountainside trailer home 10 miles away, which - miraculously - made it through the storm, says Ashley Clawson, the girlfriend's mother.

"He was just caked in mud," she says, "from head to toe."

Brown was in new clothes taken from a store with a broken window, she says.

"I don't blame him for stealing," she continues. "What else was he supposed to do?"

Brown has stayed in their trailer for the last few days, Clawson says.

On Thursday, Brown's hands are cut from moving branches and debris to make paths near his home, but they aren't nearly as muddy.

He and his dad, with shovels in hand, walk up the highway to their driveway. They decline help from a makeshift group of volunteers, passing their toppled, nearly vertical, 6,000-pound RAM truck without a second glance.

In Western North Carolina, mangled metal has become more common than a deer sighting. Trailers wrap trees like tinsel. Asphalt crinkles like paper mache. Wooden crosses and Jesus statues poke out of piled debris.

The Browns have a mission. The Clawsons - from nearby Clawson's Holler, where all but two people share her family's name - are there to help.

There's four dirt bikes inside a shed next to the Brown homestead. They're getting them out.

"Be careful," Brown's ax-holding brother cautions as Clawson's children leap into the mud and around an old-school can of Mountain Dew.

Jennavi Clawson, 11, makes room on a branch resting above the mud. Ashley Clawson and her grandson - a tall 2-year-old named James, pull themselves onto it.

Brown heaves the bikes out, easily revving the first, second and third bike.

The fourth sputters as his brother tries to start it.

"That one might not work," Brown says. "It's hard to start."

He leaps on the red and white frame, pumping his cowboy boot on top of the kick starter. It rattles, then shoots out a cloud of exhaust toward the forest behind him.

Everyone smiles.

"We don't have much, but we make do," Ashley Clawson says, watching her daughter's boyfriend of two years load the bikes onto his trailer.

This is a highlight of their day.

On Oct. 1, their source of light was more literal: candles on Brown's chocolate swirled ice cream cake. He turned 17 four days after the storm slopped debris onto his bed pillows.

Sending supplies down the line

In Turkey Cove, a ravine 60 miles south of the Browns' home, down past Spruce Pine and Little Switzerland, a 57-year-old woman wears a "Glenwood Elementary" t-shirt. She responds to volunteers asking if crated dogs on a disheveled hill need anything.

They're good, she says before loading them into a silver Nissan Rogue.

She drives down the bumpy side road and stops to talk to four men helping deliver supplies and a Charlotte Observer reporter in a fleet of ATVs.

"My daddy did a good job, didn't he?" Karen Hollifield says, pointing to the small wooden cabin her father built on the hillside above years ago. It survived Helene.

Somehow, in a house half a mile up the mountain, so did her brother and sister-in-law, she says.

The couple lived in a doublewide trailer nestled up the side road Hollifield just drove down. They heard cracking and rushing water. They stood up and took one step, but the mud stopped them there. It launched them out of the home, broke Hollifield's brother's back and buried her sister-in-law up to her neck, Hollifield says.

Her dad's craftsmanship held up once more. His china cabinet, ousted from its spot in the corner of the room, fell on top of the sister-in-law - trapping her, but also shielding her from the rushing water above.

Hollifield's brother got out first, she says. Then he went to the neighbors'.

"I give all the credit to them," Hollifield says. They dug her sister-in-law out.

Her family and their neighbors all survived, but the seven dachshunds that roamed the property are gone. Hollifield found one of them dead, she says as she shooed a yellowjacket away from her bicep.

The bees have sent several people in Western North Carolina into anaphylactic shock, according to officials who made calls for more Epipen and Benadryl donations.

Both are stocked in one ATV manned by an Operation Airdrop volunteer from the Outer Banks. He and his neighbor drove west to put their hobby to use - to help.

Hollifield doesn't want either medicine. She just needs to make sure she doesn't get stung, she says, her t-shirt sleeves rolled up, resting on top of her shoulders, exposing her arms.

Down the road, at Turkey Cove Baptist Church, a lady with the same "town name" - Hollifield - similarly rejects supplies, saying other places probably need it more.

The church got its first stockpile on Oct. 1, four days after the storm severed them from the rest of the world. Many members of the congregation stayed as the "little bitty creek" flooded, says April Hollifield, 72. They stayed in the days after, too.

They knew what would happen if they left before the storm: they wouldn't be able to come back, she says. Not for a while, at least.

The souls who stayed through the storm quickly threaded lifelines between each other.

"The immediate response came from the citizens... from the victims," says Jennifer Bowman, a volunteer who took Jeeps, trucks and horses stocked with supplies to Burnsville - one of the state's hardest hit towns.

A "sweet local lady" had set up a distribution point and was trying to manage it by herself. Bowman and a fleet of others organized the supplies, multiplied them and dispersed them.

"Nobody wanted to take more than what they absolutely needed," Bowman says.

One woman asked for just two rolls of toilet paper. When Bowman brought out a "Sam's-Club-sized" pack, she cried and muttered.

I just feel so greedy taking that much toilet paper.

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Bizarre dead-body rumors impede Helene disaster response, NC county spokeswoman says

October 13, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Joe Marusak and Adam Wagner; Staff Writer | Section: News | 645 Words Page: 21A OpenURL Link

False social media rumors are hurting the emergency response to the Helene disaster in Western North Carolina, the spokeswoman for hard-hit Buncombe County said Thursday.

"1,000 unidentified bodies" at the Asheville hospital, one rumor claimed this week. "Buzzards everywhere."

The Charlotte CEO/founder of a beverage company helped fuel the falsehood by spreading the rumor to her Facebook followers, according to a copy of her post reviewed by The Charlotte Observer.

Two-thousand people trapped in a Candler church, another since-debunked rumor stated.

And a photo shared online showed people in a supposed N.C. mountain mudslide during Helene. The slide happened elsewhere in the world and not during Helene, Buncombe County spokeswoman Lillian Govus said Thursday.

"Those are not true," Govus said, replying to a question from The Charlotte Observer and The (Raleigh) News & Observer during her county's daily Helene disaster-response news conference on Zoom.

"And those hurt, because ... we have to redivert resources and make sure that our emergency personnel check that off the list. And it may be the fourth time that we've done that.

"... It takes away time and resources from us being able to do those critical lifesaving maneuvers in our community," Govus said.

"Verified information is critical at this time," she said. "But as we are trying to disseminate accurate, correct and truthful information in real time," investigating outlandish rumors "is a really big obstacle for us to overcome."

"So I would ask that if you are so compelled to share information on social media, that those sources be from the county, the city of Asheville, the agencies that are supporting us at the federal level, at the state level with North Carolina Emergency Services, and verified individuals."

Kody Kinsley, secretary of the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, called the social media rumors of hundreds of bodies piled up "disinformation."

"It's just not true," he said Thursday.

"We don't have a big backlog of work here," Kinsley said. "There's no large number of decedents that we're processing."

As of Wednesday afternoon, North Carolina was working on identifying four bodies, he said.

The state has now confirmed 115 deaths from Helene, and the sheriff of Buncombe County has counted 72 just in his county, The News & Observer reported.

"Our search and recovery has not ceased," Buncombe Sheriff Quentin Miller said. "We've been trying to do that 24/7. We cannot stop. We must continue to move forward."

Reporting human remains during Helene cleanup

If someone finds human remains while cleaning up debris, Kinsley said, they should call their local law enforcement's non-emergency phone number. Those local officials will work with the state team to gather the remains and start processing them.

To help identify bodies, DHHS has shifted medical examiners from the eastern part of the state to the west. When a body is found, Kinsley said, it is collected by one of six fatality recovery teams working in the storm-damaged region.

Next, the body is taken to a central processing site where examiners first try to identify the person. When they were found in their home or were carrying identification, that's easier. But sometimes, Kinsley said, identification requires DNA work or assistance from North Carolina's State Crime Lab.

After a body is identified, the examiners work to determine whether the cause of death is storm-related. In the case of a drowning or the victim of a landslide, that's obvious.

Other times, it's more difficult, Kinsley said, as in the case of someone who is found in a home and could have died from either blunt force trauma or a heart attack.

Those cases require more extensive work from forensic pathologists.

DHHS tries to let families of storm victims know what happened as soon as it can, Kinsley added.

"We very quickly inform the family and then after that we add them to our storm total. And then we continue to process the remains to return them to the family," Kinsley said.

News & Observer reporter Virginia Bridges contributed.

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After Helene, Western NC NPR station did more than report news. It opened doors for others

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Author: Mary Ramsey; Staff Writer | Section: News | 570 Words

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Blue Ridge Public Radio has provided not just for its own staff - but for journalists from across North Carolina and the country - as reporters descended on Asheville after Helene's hit.

Western North Carolina's National Public Radio affiliate remains on the air amid ongoing power and water outages in Asheville, where the station is based. Staff are working extended shifts and have expanded the station's services since the storm hit to bring critical news to a wider audience.

The station also opened the doors to its downtown Asheville office to journalists from other news outlets who need a safe place and a stable internet connection to file their own stories about the devastation. Outside reporters, photographers and editors simply ring the building's doorbell, and they're greeted by BPR staff and ushered to whatever workspace is currently available.

"We're a little sub-community," said Laura Lee, BPR's news director. "... And like many communities, you sort of band together and open your doors in whatever ways you can."

Opening the doors

The station ran on a generator initially when power went out, Lee said. But with a central location, the building got power and internet back relatively quickly. That was particularly beneficial journalists traveling to the area still afflicted by hundreds of thousands of power outages.

"It just seemed to make sense to extend that benefit to other media," Lee said.

The open-door policy has brought in "a blend of familiar faces and new people," Lee said. Other local news organizations such as Asheville Watchdog have been frequent visitors, and other guests have included The Charlotte Observer and The New York Times.

The program is "a natural extension" of collegiality among North Carolina media, Lee said.

"This isn't to say we're not competitive with each other - of course we are in some circumstances. But I think generally, there's just more of a collaborative spirit in journalism now," she said.

Helene news

The first days after Helene hit were "pretty nerve-wracking," Lee said, as she and other leadership tried to track the staff's whereabouts. It took about 24 hours to reach one reporter, and almost 72 hours to make contact with another.

"We're feeling good now in terms of being able to account for each other every day and sort of working around some of the communication barriers that we had before," she said Tuesday.

Coverage has focused on the most vital information and updates across the station's typical 14-county coverage area and beyond. The station has regularly carried live updates from officials. For some still without power or internet access, the radio is their only source of news about where to get water, food and other essential aid.

"It just became apparent how valuable and how critical that was for people who were completely blocked off from other access to other information," Lee said.

The station also launched a text-only version of its website at text.bpr.org, making it easier for folks with slow or limited internet access to load articles. BPR also expanded its Spanish-language coverage.

What's next for Blue Ridge Public Radio?

"It's really hard," Lee said, to know what comes next for BPR as the station and the community move out from the immediate aftermath of Helene.

"Even though we're not, you know, a day or two out of the storm, we are still without water. The vast majority of Asheville .. is still without power. So in some ways, it doesn't feel like we have hit a recovery place yet," she said.

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After Helene hit IV fluid plant, NC hospitals use Gatorade, rationing to handle shortages

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Author: Chase Jordan; Staff Writer | Section: News | 689 Words

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Hospitals in Charlotte, like their counterparts across the Carolinas and the nation, continue to deal with IV fluid shortages after Hurricane Helene flooding caused major problems for a manufacturing site in Western North Carolina.

The rain and storm surge from Helene flooded Baxter International's North Cove manufacturing site in McDowell County. Baxter supplies 60% of IV solutions used at hospitals and care centers in North America. Liquids with electrolytes like Gatorade are even being used for drinks as an IV fluid substitute for some patients in North Carolina and elsewhere around the country.

Novant Health, one of the Charlotte region's two main health care providers, told The Charlotte Observer it is conserving IV fluid supplies to minimize any impact to patient care. The hospital system said it is not planning to stop medical procedures.

Novant said it evaluates patients' needs to find the proper way to provide hydration, which can include water or fluids with electrolytes.

Atrium Health, the biggest health care provider in the Charlotte region, did not respond to multiple requests for comment from The Charlotte Observer about its IV fluid needs.

Novant was notified about not receiving its full allocation of Baxter products, and is working to source additional products from primary suppliers not impacted by Helene. "Our thoughts are with (Baxter's) teams as they face this unimaginable disaster," Novant said in a statement.

N.C. Department of Health and Human Services reported that healthcare facilities will use conservation methods such as Gatorade to ensure IV fluid supply can be maintained for situations where oral hydration is not an option.

Ensuring that people impacted by the storm can access medical supplies is a top priority, said DHHS spokeswoman Summer Tonizzo.

Rebuilding the Baxter IV fluid plant

The federal government and state partners are in touch with Baxter and helping the North Cove facility evaluate damages and engage in recovery efforts.

On Wednesday, Baxter announced that it would be increasing allocation for IV solution supplies from 40% to 60%. Baxter also expects to be at 70% by the end of October, and 90% to 100% by the end of the year, according to the American Hospital Association and the company.

Baxter will continue to ration its IV products, the Raleigh News & Observer reported, including: saline, used to rehydrate patients and replace electrolytes; dextrose, a sugar solution used when patients are dehydrated or have low blood sugar, (Saline and dextrose are also used with other drugs that need to administered by IV.); and dialysis solutions for patients with kidney failure.

The state's health department is focused on reducing supply chain disruptions that may result from damage to the facility and surrounding infrastructure, Tonizzo said. The state will continue to coordinate with the Federal

Emergency Management Agency to help the company clean up the facility, Tonizzo added.

In the wake of Helene, Baxter managed to build a causeway into the plant, the News & Observer said. It has hundreds of workers at the plant already handling repairs to damaged and flooded areas.

And NCDOT is rebuilding a bridge to the plant with a temporary one provided by the Florida DOT.

Baxter also set up an onsite command center, and is contacting customers and industry officials about the allocation of products. Baxter officials were not available for comment Thursday.

IV fluid concerns across the Carolinas

The IV fluid shortages are impacting hospitals across the Carolinas.

Last Friday, Duke University Hospital told the News & Observer that it is "working to assess inventory, deploy conservation strategies, and triage future distribution in an equitable manner across the health system. At this time, we are making case-by-case assessments of our ability to safely perform certain surgeries and procedures going into the weekend and next week."

And the South Carolina Department of Public Health issued a health advisory Oct. 4 about the Baxter site impact to IV fluid and dialysis solutions.

The state agency, prior to any federal declaration of a supply shortage, recommended health facilities start conserving inventory and reduce non-essential uses. A recommendation was made to prioritize IV fluid use for urgent medical needs.

The agency notified healthcare agencies across the state formally asking them to follow those same guidelines.

The (Rock Hill) Herald reporter John Marks contributed to this report

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He jumped into a river to survive Helene. Sheltering near Charlotte, he looks forward

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Danny Mancini knew it was time to take his chances in the river when Helene's floodwaters started shaking his home early Saturday.

Between midnight and 8 a.m., the Broad River flooded Mancini's Subaru WRX to the roof. Then it climbed 18 feet up a slope to the modular home Mancini built in Black Mountain two years ago.

For a few minutes after Mancini woke up, the 41-year-old south Florida transplant thought he could stay in the house.

Then water slowly seeped in and his home began loosening from its concrete foundation.

"That's when I panicked," said Mancini, an owner of four Buncombe County smoke shops.

Some days since have been a blur, Mancini said. After he escaped his home, he hiked down a mountain, hitchhiked to Asheville, slept and ate little but eventually made his way to Matthews, where he's been living in a hotel.

Like many Western North Carolina people whose homes were harmed by Helene, he's temporarily without an address, living with little more than the clothes he escaped in and the help of family and friends.

"It hasn't been easy," Mancini said, of the start of his quest to try to put his Black Mountain life back together. "I'm just grateful to be alive."

A leap into the river

When Mancini's one-story home began to move under his water-soaked shoes the morning of Sept. 28, he grabbed his phone and gold necklace and hurried out his front door onto a wooden porch left wobbly by rushing water.

He left the door open so Layla, his corgi, could escape too.

Not far downstream, he saw the top of a then-flooded tree poking out of the swollen river. So he jumped in. Just as Mancini hoped, the water rushed him directly to its branches.

From there, he could hold on, stretch his leg toward the slope and make a push for drier land.

Mancini's home, with all of his possessions, was teetering on the hill.

One of his cars, with his wallet, was submerged and the other had disappeared to who knows where.

"If I had to guess, Lake Lure," he said during a recent interview. "A 20-minute drive."

Now what?. he asked himself.

Alone, Mancini walked in the rain, through mud, around fallen trees and over landslide debris, he said.

Five hours later, around 1 p.m. Saturday, a rescue crew found Mancini on North Carolina Highway 9 and took him to

a firehouse in Fairview.

But he didn't stay long. He wanted to get off the mountain before nightfall to reach a place where there would be electricity and roads leading to family members, he said.

So Mancini walked 10 miles to U.S. 74. There, he hitchhiked to Asheville arriving around 7 p.m., and fell asleep inside one of the smoke shops that he owns.

Challenged but grateful and optimistic

At some point - Mancini doesn't know when - the Broad River took his home.

He's seen it since, ripped open and laying on top of the Subaru and halfway down the hill it once sat on. His vegetable greenhouse is gone. Same with his camper and a metal outbuilding that was his office.

Despite losing almost everything, Mancini said he can't help but to feel lucky.

None of his four Plug Smoke Shops, which he opened in the past two years, were damaged. Layla somehow made it safe to a neighbor.

His 4-year-old daughter, who was supposed to spend the night of the flood with Mancini and had never missed a scheduled night with him, was safe at her mother's house when Helene hit.

And FEMA inspectors have already visited what's left of his home. They've deposited some \$54,000 into his account - certainly not enough to replace everything he lost but more than he ever expected, Mancini said.

Mancini said he'll likely stay at a hotel in Matthews a few more days. Then he'll go to his girlfriend's in Flat Rock, a town with power, water and internet.

After that, Mancini is not sure. But he doesn't assume the worst.

"This is going to be good for me somehow," Mancini predicted.

What will he do with his property after he removes the tattered remains of his home?

He might turn it into a campground to pay the mortgage. But he won't live there.

"I'm pretty traumatized by that river and that property," he said.

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