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Hurricane Helene: Protect Yourself After the Storm

October 18, 2024 | Bertie Ledger-Advance (NC) Author: Josh Stein Columnist | Section: News | 558 Words OpenURL Link

The impact of Hurricane Helene on western North Carolina is devastating.

As I've traveled the western part of the state to visit with and hear from the people who were affected, at the same time I've been heartbroken by the loss, I've been inspired by their optimism and the many ways they are showing up for each other.

As relief and recovery work continues, we want to ensure our neighbors out west have the resources and support they need. You can find this information by visiting www.ncdoj.gov/helene.

If you're in western North Carolina recovering from the damage, please watch out for price gouging, when a seller charges an unfair or excessive price. Also be wary of repair scams.

In the aftermath of a natural disaster, most contractors and tree removal professionals in North Carolina pitch in to help their community recover from a disaster. However, some scammers travel to areas that have been hit by storms and other disasters to rip off desperate homeowners.

Our office's Consumer Protection Division phone line is open for people to report price gouging or other Helene-related concerns. You can reach our office to make a report at 1-877-5-NO-SCAM or www.ncdoj.gov/pricegouging.

We are monitoring and reviewing price gouging complaints closely and have already sent out four civil investigative demands. We will not hesitate to take additional legal action if appropriate.

When the time comes to address repairs and needs for your own property, be safe and do not attempt to move downed power lines. It's also important to contact your insurance company before starting work.

Beware of contractors who try to rush you or come to your home offering assistance. Ask neighbors for recommendations. If possible, get three written estimates for the work and compare bids. Make sure your contract is in writing and it includes a payment schedule where you pay as the work is completed. Do not pay for work up front because you may not see the contractor again.

The outpouring of support for western North Carolina is tremendous, much needed, and much appreciated. If you're looking to donate to those impacted, make sure you're doing so safely and securely.

Choose the charities you know or research a charity's ratings and prior complaints with the Better Business Bureau, Charity Navigator, Guidestar, the North Carolina Secretary of State and NCDOJ's Consumer Protection Division.

Ask how the charity will spend your donation. You want as much as possible to go to people in need. Remember that if you're feeling pressured to give immediately, don't. Legitimate charities won't pressure you.

Be particularly careful with crowdfunding campaigns – only donate if you have verified that funds are going to a good cause.

When you're making your donation, pay with a credit card through the charity's website or by calling a phone number you know to be legitimate. Credit cards are best for security and tax purposes, and you can dispute the charge later if there's a concern.

One way you can provide support is through the North Carolina Disaster Relief Fund: www.nc.gov/donate.

North Carolinians' goodness shines in moments of crisis. I know it will be a long recovery, but I am so thankful to see neighbors helping neighbors, responders conducting search and rescue missions, and good samaritans everywhere helping. It's going to take weeks and months and, in some cases, years to rebuild. But we will, because in North Carolina, we're first in line to help each other.

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10 Tips for NC Voters as Early Voting Begins This Week

October 18, 2024 | BladenOnline.com (Elizabethtown, NC) Author: staff report| Section: Local News| 776 Words OpenURL Link

Contributed

Raleigh, N.C. — In-person early voting for the 2024 general election begins Thursday and ends at 3:00 p.m. November 2 in all 100 counties.

Statewide, 419 early voting sites will open on Thursday across North Carolina.

"In-person early voting has been the most popular method of voting in recent general elections, and we expect that will continue in 2024," said Karen Brinson Bell, executive director of the State Board of Elections.

In 2020, 65% of North Carolina voters chose in-person early voting as their voting method. And in the presidential election of 2016, 62% of NC voters cast their ballot early.

The following are 10 tips for voters as early voting begins:

- 1. Early voting locations. Eligible voters may cast a ballot at any early voting site in their county. For sites and hours in all 100 counties, use the Early Voting Sites Search tool. Also see Early Voting Sites for the November 5, 2024 General Election (PDF). The busiest days for early voting are often the first day and the last couple of days.
- 2. Candidate info. Sample ballots are available through the Voter Search tool. For information on candidates for the state Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, see the State Board's Judicial Voter Guide: 2024 General Election. The Guide is also being mailed to all NC households. Election officials do not provide information about candidates for other contests, but some media outlets and advocacy groups do. Many candidates also have websites and social media accounts. Being familiar with your ballot choices will help your voting experience go more smoothly.
- 3. Bring Your Photo ID. Voters will be asked to show photo ID when they check in to vote. Most voters will show their driver's license, but many other forms of photo ID will be accepted. Voters who do not have photo ID can meet the photo ID requirement by either (1) filling out a form explaining why they are unable to show ID, or (2) showing their ID at the county board of elections office by 5 p.m. November 14. More information about the photo ID requirement is available at BringItNC.gov.
- 4. Free Photo IDs. Any registered voter who needs a photo ID can get one for free from their county board of elections office during the early voting period, which ends on November 2. For details, go to Get a Free Voter Photo ID.
- 5. Register to Vote. The regular voter registration deadline was October 11. But any North Carolinian who is eligible to vote may still register and vote during the early voting period. Registrants must provide proof of their residence address, which can be a driver's license or other government document, paycheck, utility bill, or bank statement. For more information, visit Register in Person During Early Voting.
- 6. Updating Registration. During early voting, registered voters may update their name or address within the same county, if necessary.
- 7. Absentee Ballot Drop-off. Voters who vote by absentee ballot can return it by mail or hand it to an election official at an early voting site in their county. They can also drop it off in person to their county board of elections office. Voters registered in the 25 counties in the Helene disaster area in Western North Carolina may return their

absentee ballot to any early voting site in the state during early voting hours. Ballots will be kept secure and delivered to the voter's county board of elections for processing. For more information on returning absentee-by-mail ballots, see Detailed Instructions to Vote By Mail.

- 8. Voting in Person Instead of Absentee. Voters who requested an absentee ballot but have not yet returned it may choose instead to vote in person during the early voting period or on Election Day, November 5. Voters may discard the absentee ballot and do not need to bring it to a voting site.
- 9. Peace at the Polls. All voters should respect the rights of others to participate in the election. Election officials are trained to quickly address incidents that might interfere with a voter's ability to cast their ballot. Intimidating any voter is a crime. Voters who feel harassed or intimidated should notify an election official immediately.
- 10. Voters in Need of Assistance. Voters in need of assistance may bring an eligible person to help them enter and exit the polling place or to help them complete their ballot according to the voter's instructions. Election officials are also available to help voters. Curbside voting is also available for voters unable to enter the voting site. For more information, visit Curbside Voting.

For more information about early voting, visit Vote Early in Person.

The post 10 Tips for NC Voters as Early Voting Begins This Week appeared first on .

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Former West Carteret students share harrowing experiences of facing hurricanes away from home

October 18, 2024 | Carteret County News-Times, The (Morehead City, NC) Author: ZACK NALLY NEWS-TIMES | Section: News | 801 Words OpenURL Link

MOREHEAD CITY — For two former West Carteret students, this fall's hurricane season has been a lesson in the unexpected.

During a recent episode of YouthPoints, a newly revived program on The Talk Station that gives local youth a platform to share their experiences, Ava Johnson and Kayden Lemons recalled their encounters with two major storms.

Johnson, a sophomore at Appalachian State University, recalls the day her routine college life was upended by Hurricane Helene.

What began as a typical week in Boone quickly transformed into a nightmare as torrential rain and flooding left her stranded in an apartment with three roommates for four days.

"It was a normal week of classes," Johnson said. "It was parents' weekend coming up, and we were all checking the weather to make sure it wasn't going to rain during the game against Liberty. Thursday and Friday looked like they would have heavy rain, but Saturday was supposed to be clear, so we all thought it would be fine. But when we woke up Thursday morning, all classes were canceled."

Johnson left her dorm and went to a friend's apartment right off Highway 421, where they soon found themselves trapped as floodwaters surrounded the building. The mountain town, unaccustomed to such severe flooding, saw major road closures, and the four girls were isolated with limited supplies.

"We had about four cans of soup and four of us," Johnson recalled. "We tried to space it out so we could make it through the days."

Boone's flooding knocked out power, leaving Johnson and her friends with no electricity, no internet, and barely any phone signal. They spent days in the dark, surviving on what little they had. Fortunately, the apartment sat on higher ground, sparing them from the worst of the flooding, but the fear was palpable.

"Growing up on the coast, hurricanes are something you get used to," Ava explained. "But a hurricane in the mountains is something I don't think many people have experienced. It was very scary, and I'm just happy that I was safe and able to get out."

While stranded, the group found small comforts – when the power returned briefly, they played Mario Kart to pass the time. Yet, Johnson knew it was only a temporary escape from the stark reality that Boone, like much of the western part of the state, was wholly unprepared for the storm's impact.

"Nobody knew it was going to be that bad," she said. "That's a big argument up there now – people say the school didn't prepare us enough, but no one really saw this coming. Hurricanes like that just don't happen in the mountains."

As the floodwaters subsided, Johnson frantically packed a few essentials, grabbed her book bag and school supplies and left. Returning home to Carteret County, she later reflected on the close-knit community at Appalachian State and how quickly people came together to help with the cleanup.

"It's a devastating thing to go through," she said, "but seeing the community try to put everything back together was comforting."

A Different Kind of Escape

Meanwhile, Lemons, a current senior living in Orlando, faced a different hurricane challenge – evacuation. As Hurricane Milton approached Florida as a Category 4 storm, her family made the difficult decision to leave their home behind.

"My mom had been talking about it for a couple of days when we heard about the hurricane," Kayden said. "When we heard it was going to be a Category 4 or 5, we decided to leave."

The evacuation wasn't as chaotic as Lemons expected. Traffic was manageable, and her family packed their car with essentials for their return to Morehead City. Among the bags filled with clothes and personal items were more sentimental things like family photos and important paperwork.

"We each brought our own little bag," Lemons said. "I have a cat and a turtle, so we brought them too. My mom also has this big binder with all of our baby photos and things like that. We made sure to take that with us."

Lemons and her family weren't able to bring everything of sentimental value, placing special items and expensive electronics in the top of their closets in case the house sustained major flooding.

As fortunate as Lemons felt to be able to evacuate, she acknowledged how difficult it can be for some families to evacuate due to financial or logistical constraints, and she made efforts to stay in touch with friends who remained in Florida during the storm. The cost of evacuating, she pointed out, isn't something everyone can easily afford.

Sally King, who also attended the YouthPoints recording, shared her own evacuation memories from Hurricane Florence in 2018, reflecting on the scramble to pack anything of sentimental value before leaving.

"I remember ransacking my room and trying to find anything with sentimental value," she said, "and packing a bag way bigger than it needed to be."

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How the military is helping with recovery from Helene

October 18, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Catherine Muccigrosso; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1492 Words

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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 Ardnt 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.

Along the route, many businesses are closed. Parking lots like Wendy's and Dollar General are caked in mud, while shopping centers are now staging areas for utility crews. A gem mining sign says "rain or shine," but it's closed.

A passing pickup driver gives a thumbs up. A woman rolls down her truck window, shouting, "Thank you for coming!" It's a sentiment shared throughout the day.

Turning onto NC 226 E., a manned barricade allows only relief crews and local traffic through.

Too many uprooted trees to count mar the landscape. About halfway up the mountain, a portion of the road is

gone, as washed-away trees give way to a cliff drop with a view of the majestic mountains.

Army Sgt. Jared Marshall warned us it was coming. Road crews work to rebuild the outside lane as our military vehicle rumbles over the rock and gravel path.

During the hour-long ride, Marshall shared how Hurricane Helene affected his own family.

His in-laws fled their Fairview home, about 11 miles southeast of Asheville, and are staying at his house in Fayetteville.

"We're here trying to do everything we can to help out," Marshall said. "To see them happy that we're here, it brings happiness to me and all of the soldiers."

'The worst I've seen'

Arriving at Harris Middle School in Spruce Pine, mountains of bottled water sit stacked on pallets out front. Inside the closed school's gym are boxes, bags and bins filled with donations.

The soldiers answer a call for help from a line crew over an excavator stuck in mud. Dylan Myers of Oklahoma, working alongside about 200 lineworkers from Ohio, New York and Connecticut, has been on several storm damage recoveries before in Florida and Louisiana.

"This is probably the worst I've seen," the general foreman said. "I've never seen so many in distress."

'When they lose everything it's a disaster'

At 10:44 a.m., at Deyton Elementary School, about a tenth of a mile away from the middle school, pallets of livestock and animal feed, along with firewood, sit outside near more bottled water mounds. Inside, classrooms are filled with donations. Paper signs by the doors read pet food, baby supplies, cleaning supplies, hygiene and home goods.

In the library, soldiers unpack and stock bookshelves with food.

By the next week, people will be able to come in and choose what they need, said Melissa Martin, a special education teacher at Mitchell High who was sorting boxes of canned food in a classroom.

"My students have hardly anything to begin with," Martin said, her voice cracking. "and when they lose everything it's a disaster."

Residents still struggle without power, water service and cell service.

"Some still can't get out," Martin said. She and Sarah Margaret Smith of Watauga Opportunities logged 55 miles checking on students the day before. Most of the students have been accounted for, but they're still looking for some, she said. "We know they're safe but where did they go?"

Wearing a purple T-shirt with block white letters reading "We are still one," Lori Jones is coordinator at the Deyton site. The soldiers help by unloading trailers, breaking down boxes, sweeping rooms, whatever they're asked to do, the seventh-grade social studies teacher said.

Seeing the soldiers brings her a feeling of safety and security.

"It gets better every day," she said. It's a statement echoed throughout the day by other volunteers and residents.

'We couldn't make it without all the help'

At 1:23 p.m., we headed about five miles away to the new Mitchell Elementary/Middle School in Bakersville.

The stream of cars coming through the drive-thru distribution site is sometimes 10 or more deep. Wanda Duncan came for electrolytes. Soldiers and volunteers race to cars with arms full of water cases, Band-aids and wipes. Some people arrive not knowing what they need, while others have lists.

"It's a blessing to all of us here because the simple things we take for granted have been taken away," teary-eyed Duncan said. "We couldn't make it without all the help."

A sweet, familiar scent wafts through the area. Auntie Ruth's family-owned doughnut and pretzel business from East Tennessee gives out freshly made glazed doughnuts and coffee from a borrowed food truck. "We're happy to do something," said Jolene Kauffman, the owner's daughter. "It's something to brighten their days."

Lyle Hendrix of Hendersonville arrives in a pickup truck with donations collected by DSSOLVR brewery in downtown Asheville. His right wrist is covered in poison ivy blisters from cutting downed trees in his neighborhood to get himself and others out. But he's fine.

"This has showed me that people really are good," he said. "Everyone is a hero."

Dale Blevins, 66, has been overseeing supplies and donations since the distribution center opened Oct. 1. "You could see the distress on their faces," he said.

But people are beginning to smile and joke more.

Small groups of volunteers have popped in from the Charlotte area too. Then the Army showed up Oct. 4. "It was a breath of fresh air. Hands is what we need," Blevins said.

'Help and hope'

By 2:26 p.m., the last of a thousand doughnuts were handed out, including to Rachael Hollifield and her 15-year-old daughter, Taylar.

Once power was restored Tuesday, they learned of the distribution site. They came to get bottled water, food and paper towels. Like others, they don't have running water. Like so many others, their basement is flooded, too.

With prompting from a volunteer, Hollifield agrees to take a large can of potatoes and three jugs of water. "I don't want to take too much from other people who may need it," she said.

The Hollifields moved into their Spruce Pine home just two days before the storm hit. "We were totally unprepared," Hollifield said. "We didn't have power. We didn't have water. We didn't have cell service. We were stuck."

Wearing a shirt that says "God has perfect timing," Hollifield looks around and says, "Help and hope is what I see here."

Day's end

At 4:53 p.m., we head back to Harris Middle School where soldiers offloaded stacks of bottled water they moved from the distribution site.

By 6 p.m. our convoy made its way back down the mountain, as passersby wave to the soldiers and they wave back in unison.

The destruction hasn't deterred Sqt. Marshall's plans to move to the mountains near his wife's family after he's

discharged next year.

"We want to move up here regardless of the storm," the 26-year-old said. "It's such a pretty area."

Catherine Muccigrosso: 7043585198, @CatMuccigrosso

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

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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 Helene, 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 watchdog 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 Carolina-based researcher with the nonprofit Energy and Policy Institute, said in an email to The Charlotte Observer.

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

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 nonpayment.

"Why aren't North Carolina's utility regulators and its largest utility doing the 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 unable to resolve the issue, ask for their supervisor, he said.

If necessary, Watson said, contact the state's 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 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 hard-hit mountain county of Buncombe, which includes Asheville, the outage map showed.

Still, after the deadly wildfires on the island of Maui in 2023, Hawaii's Public Utilities Commission 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 announcement 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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