

# Hurricane Helene evacuees seek temporary homes in Charlotte

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On Sept. 26, Porter Watson started to prepare for Hurricane Helene. He lives in Woodfin, a mountain town north of Asheville and uphill from the French Broad River. He bought a few microwaveable meals, got gas with no issues, along with ice. Then the rain came. The power went out, the water shut off and cell service ceased. Watson watched the river rise and rage, bringing along debris and PVC pipes the size of train cars.

Luckily his home didn't sustain any damage. But after nearby flooding receded, he knew the same couldn't be said for many other areas of Western North Carolina. He jumped into the fray, helping friends dig out from the mud and damage caused by flood waters.

Then Watson and his wife Layson made the decision to leave the area. "The whole idea is to minimize our burden on the search-and-rescue and recovery efforts and available resources," he said. "Our house is an open shelter right now for anyone who needs it."

He's one of many western North Carolinians temporarily relocating two hours away to Charlotte and other eastern areas as emergency workers begin to fix the infrastructure damage caused by Helene. It's unclear how long it will take for power and water lines to be restored. Lack of cell service remains also an ongoing issue.

Those impacted by Hurricane Helene are looking for immediate housing from Hickory to Charlotte and Raleigh.

As they make the move, folks are either staying with family members or searching for hotels or Airbnbs, while hoping to avoid price gouging. And some folks, like Watson, are heading to Charlotte to pick up supplies for those still in need.

## FINDING HOUSING IN A HURRY AROUND CHARLOTTE

For people who can leave the western area, finding housing in Charlotte is a mixed bag.

Some hotels around Charlotte Douglas International Airport said facilities have been at capacity since Sept. 27.

In Hickory and Conover, which collectively has more than 1,400 hotel rooms about an hour east of Asheville, facilities are maxed out, according to Mandy Pitts Hildebrand,



Porter Watson, Shane Shields and friends gather supplies in Charlotte to take back to Western North Carolina.

CEO of the Hickory Metro Convention Center & Visitors Bureau.

Mainly, many emergency response workers are occupying those spaces.

West Asheville resident Shane Shields said he managed to secure an Airbnb in the University area of Charlotte but the options were limited.

Shields lives near the River Arts District and watched as the local businesses and art center was destroyed. His home didn't sustain any damages but like Watson, his friend, Shields left the area to lessen the burden.

"The vulnerable populations in the city as well as the rural populations in the region are not able to access a lot of those resources," Shields said. "Many people have stayed and don't have the means to leave. But I think it's helpful in some ways that the folks that can find temporary relief do so, so that the resources that are in Asheville can go to the folks who are still there and need it most."

To help with the housing search, Angela Standish and Josie Nasife started a Facebook group to connect folks who need housing with people who can offer shelter. The WNC Temporary Housing Resources group has over 1,200 members and Standish said the group is growing rapidly.

Both women are in the housing and real estate industry, so to help with the recovery efforts they wanted to put their knowledge to use.

Nasife said the idea behind the group was to create a real-time central place for folks to search for and post free or heavily discounted housing.

"There's a lot of people that are opening their homes and willing to help," Nasife said.

"We're kind of just growing the page organically, through word-of-mouth and posting on the local counties social media pages. We haven't even scratched the surface

because a lot of these folks don't have cell service."

So far, Nasife and Standish said the response has been outstanding.

Locals all over North Carolina are offering their spaces, from rooms to full houses. Nasife added that some multi-family property managers, including Southwood Realty in Gastonia, are offering at least two months free rent with the option to look at future leasing options.

Some of the properties are located throughout Charlotte and the metro area.

Standish and Nasife are monitoring the group, marking posts as completed as people's offerings or needs are met. They are also making sure prices are reasonable.

Right now, they are seeing a need for immediate housing but as things progress, the group will begin to focus on long-term spaces.

"It's just one way to get people connected and help," Standish said "This need is going to be here for a long time."

## HOUSING RESOURCES FOR PEOPLE DISPLACED BY HELENE

There are a number of open shelters throughout the counties affected by the storm. A list can be found at ReadyNC.gov.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has activated its Transitional Sheltering Assistance program for displaced residents in these counties: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Clay, Cleveland, Gaston, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Lincoln, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey counties. The program is also available for those in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

The program will cover the costs of hotel and

motel temporary stays, including room, taxes and non-refundable pet fees. The program is available for those who applied for disaster assistance.

FEMA said residents do not need to request the housing assistance. They will be notified by the agency of their eligibility through automated contact.

Airbnb is also offering free temporary housing through their nonprofit, Airbnb.org. The organization is offering temporary stays for 10 to 14 days free of charge, according to Christoph Gorder, executive director of the organization.

Gorder said North Carolinians who are in need of shelter can reach out to 211 to determine eligibility and to be given access to the free Airbnb sites. Going onto Airbnb's regular website will not show the free offerings.

Current hosts can reach out to Airbnb to offer their listings for free. Gorder added that if someone isn't a host but is interested in becoming one during the emergency, they can reach out to Airbnb.

## PRICE-GOUGING COMPLAINTS

Price gouging laws went into effect immediately after the storm, making it illegal for businesses to raise costs to make a profit during the emergency.

As of Oct. 3, N.C. Attorney General Josh Stein's office has received over 150 complaints including for high fuel, groceries and hotel costs.

One person in Cleveland County said they

were charged \$10 for a loaf of bread. Another person in Hickory said they spent \$45 on a 24-pack of water. In Boone, one person said a Quality Inn and Suites that usually charges \$100 for a room per night is now charging more than \$388.

In Charlotte, a Google search showed that prices were relatively normal for hotels around the airport and in Uptown.

North Carolinians may submit complaints of price gouging online or by phone. To report potential price gouging, call 1-877-5-NO-SCAM or go to [ncdoj.gov/pricegouging](https://ncdoj.gov/pricegouging).

## NEXT STEPS FOR DISPLACED RESIDENTS

For Watson and Shields, it's unclear when they'll return to their homes but they are going back to Asheville and nearby cities with supplies.

Shields has already made one trip back to Asheville with the help of a friend's truck.

"Many folks have stepped up in bringing supplies in from runs that they've done in Charlotte or wherever they might be," Shields said. "I know that there are a lot of governmental agencies and institutions and public workers that are working tirelessly around the clock. But because the community is small... a lot of folks have jumped in to help however they can, and not wait for everybody to be checked on through those agencies."

Outside Watson's temporary space in the Elizabeth neighborhood of

Charlotte, 8x10 trailers and SUVs were stuffed with loaded gas canisters, water, diapers and other essential supplies.

Asheville is a small city, Shields said, and that's allowed for grassroots effort to form to help Western North Carolina.

The group gathered Wednesday evening prepping for a trip out west. Watson said so far he's received thousands of dollars in donations, all of which are being used to purchase supplies. The trailers were also gifted for the ride.

The plan is to be as helpful as possible without interfering with federal aid, according to Watson. They plan to disperse the donations throughout the places they can reach including the towns of Marshal, Spruce Pine and Asheville.

They also intend to do wellness checks for anyone in need and just be a source of information for residents.

While the team was packing, random neighbors were approaching them with money and whatever supplies they had on hand, including open packages of water.

Shields and Watson said the city of Charlotte and residents throughout North Carolina have stepped up to help in the effort. And they'll need to continue doing so for a long time.

"We're going to try to be that satellite, that supply source that people need right now, because people aren't getting the appropriate support they need," Watson said. "The two aims that we're trying to accomplish... are getting supplies to people and getting people gas and car maintenance so that they can get off the mountain."

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