

Buncombe County Election Services, NC

Buncombe County, NC Helene Disaster Response

On September 27, 2024, Tropical Storm Helene struck Western North Carolina (WNC) causing widespread devastation. In Buncombe County, the hardest hit area in the state, floodwater caused over 106 fatalities, destroyed roads, homes, and businesses. Utilities were disrupted, and communication was limited to radio and word of mouth. Basic necessities like food, water, and gasoline were scarce. With just three weeks until early voting, polling sites were lost, poll workers were unable to serve--uncertainty was everywhere.

Thankfully, many were prepared to take action. Election Services and Emergency Services staff began working together in 2022 on an Incident Action Plan (IAP) for implementation in the event of an emergency during an election. Relationship building and psychological resiliency was a focus of this planning and proved critical in compassionately overcoming problems never encountered before. This included prioritizing the basic needs of staff so that work could begin quickly and with enough psychological safety to think resourcefully.

The result was that the community was reassured that voting would go on and it did- in numbers WNC should take pride in.

Creativity & Innovation

The IAP prepared the team not for this exact emergency but with a mindset for connection and creative thinking. Viewing emergency preparedness relationally was both innovative and fruitful. Knowing this focus, election officials congregated at headquarters the day after the storm to take care of each other. All were eventually accounted for, food and water shared, and places to stay secured. This early attention to psychological comfort and basic needs allowed work to resume quickly.

Partners then rose to the occasion. Staff from other departments joined operations. Reliable radio communications were aired. Realtime data and maps were generated. Fire departments assisted in identifying usable facilities. Shuttles from shelters to voting locations, were established. State assistance secured temporary voting structures. These are just a few examples of the creative solutions born. The result was that in a very short amount of time, new voting locations were found, new voting plans developed, and updated information was effectively distributed to voters. This would not have been possible without previous relationship development and tools practiced for remaining levelheaded under pressure.

Cost Effectiveness

Effective IAP development takes time and practice. Conversations about operations and resources, as well as tabletop exercises involving many partners, require significant coordination and time but the payoff is huge. Knowing who to go to, when and how to help people feel safe enough for clear thinking was the foundation for efficiency. Due to previous planning and preparation, there were less errors and a greater capacity for resourcefulness and creative thinking. Additionally, elections serve as excellent opportunities to keep county-wide IAPs fresh as they operate at least annually and interact with a wide variety of county, state, and municipal government agencies as well as non-government groups.

Replicability

Incident Action Planning is a well-established method of emergency planning that can be implemented by any agency. Most Emergency Services departments are familiar, and training is readily available. In this case fostering relationships was of particular interest. The IAP was used to help identify these relationships

and put people in contact with each other to form relevant connections. Finding ways to bolster positive communication in non-emergency situations helps prepare for emergencies. Buncombe County Election Services prepared by becoming familiar with mindfulness techniques, going through crucial conversation courses, doing team building activities and learning about each other through personality tests like the DiSC assessment.

Category Requirements

The attention given to relationship building and psychological safety made the IAP development process and implementation much more effective when a disaster of previously unknown proportions unfortunately came to fruition.

Improves Outcomes

In the aftermath of Tropical Storm Helene, conditions were extremely uncertain. As evidenced by citizens visiting the elections office before evacuating or on their way to collect food and water from distribution centers, there was obvious concern that the ability to vote was in jeopardy. This relational approach to emergency planning allowed Buncombe County Election Services to confidently reassure the region that access to voting would remain. The success of this approach also helped bolster confidence in election integrity because, despite Helene and high water, voting went on. It was a resilient system, and, in fact, Western North Carolina voters turned out in just as high rates as the rest of the state!

Comments

We care about voting in Buncombe County, North Carolina. This strong mission to make voting happen is what made us come together. It was key to make those deep connections before the storm. People had questions about whether the 2024 General Election was going to happen and we were confident it would. We are lucky in North Carolina that we could have held this election entirely on paper without laptops. Having back up procedures like back up labels and the emergency bin on the tabulating machine meant this election was going to happen come Helene or high water.

Additional Materials:



