



‘There is incredible spirit’

Lutheran Disaster Response aids Hurricane Helene recovery.

BY ERIN STRYBIS

IN LATE SEPTEMBER 2024, Hurricane Helene ravaged the southeastern corner of the United States, decimating homes and infrastructures and killing 230 people. Western North Carolina, northwestern South Carolina and part of eastern Tennessee were the hardest hit, Lutheran Disaster Response reported.

“These long-standing communities—where homes are on the side of the mountain—[had] never seen something like [Helene],” said Maryn Olson, Lutheran Disaster Response director. “The volume of water ... washed [some] homes off their foundations.”

With thousands displaced and thousands more experiencing widespread power and water outages, Lutheran Disaster Response acted quickly to address Hurricane Helene’s impact. The team reached out to Lutheran Services of Carolinas, Inspiritus (formerly Lutheran Social Services of Tennessee and Georgia), and the ELCA’s Southeastern, Florida-Bahamas, South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia synods to determine their needs.

“We’re not a Red Cross. We don’t deploy a team and go door to door. We always follow the

lead of our local companions,” Olson said, stressing that the organization is an expression of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. “We say... ‘You’re in our prayers. We’re here to walk with you as long as you would have us alongside you.’”

UNPRECEDENTED DAMAGE AND RESPONSE

In her seven years of working for Lutheran Services Carolinas, Ilham Thurston had not seen hurricane damage extend to western North Carolina before Helene. “[People] were without power... without water,” the disaster services program manager said. “We had two phones that were running constantly.”

Because the maximum award from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for Hurricane Helene survivors to repair or replace their home is \$42,500, additional funding from Lutheran Disaster Response, its partners and other VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) members has been vital for those who experienced great losses, Olson noted.

In the early days after Hurricane Helene, Lutheran Disaster Response sent grants to food banks to replace destroyed supplies and help transport groceries to hungry people.

As part of the North Carolina emergency response

team, Thurston fielded requests for water, IV fluids, medicine, winter gear, blankets, sleeping masks and ready-to-eat meals. She worked to connect people in need with critical resources. Months later, “We’re still activated, still monitoring requests and trying to help,” Thurston said.

ELCA pastors Ruth Ann and Ray Sipe, coordinators for Lutheran Disaster Response of the Carolinas, distributed clean-up kits, which included buckets and supplies to mitigate water damage, and children’s comfort boxes filled with art supplies. Local ELCA congregations had assembled the kits as part of “God’s Work. Our Hands.” Sunday earlier in September. The Sipes estimate they’ve delivered 1,000 kits and continue to receive calls for more as of November 2024.

The Sipes also worked with ELCA pastors in their synod to distribute quilts, gas and propane heaters to congregations and partner organizations responding to and recovering from hurricane damage.

“People might disagree vehemently about politics, but they care about their neighbors. They care about their community,” Olson said. “There is incredible spirit. There is a sense of community. People have rallied and rolled up their sleeves. We’re going to figure out how to do this together.”

BUILDING WELLS, PARTNERSHIPS, BRIDGES

FEMA is predicting that recovery from Hurricane Helene will take 10 years, Thurston said. “Every disaster starts and ends locally,” she added. “There’s the whole state [and] there’s the region level. Each state has its own path. Each county has its own path. It’s not going to be even within a county. ...It’s not 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and we’re done. [Everyone has] their own trajectory.”

Now that long-term recovery efforts are underway, Lutheran Disaster Response is focusing on supporting case management and rebuilding efforts in the Southeast.

Ray Sipe said that the Carolina synods partnered with Catholic Charities, helping to secure a location and provide food for a training program run by a Catholic Charities team “that teaches case management: how to sit with survivors...talk with them about their stories...ask about funding and damage, and work out a plan on how they will move forward.”

After the Aston Park skilled nursing community in Asheville, North Carolina lost access to water, staff have had water trucked into the facility to be able to continue services. Because there was no timeline for restoration of water service, Lutheran Services Carolinas requested funds to build a temporary well in 2025, Thurston said.

Olson highlights the repair work done at Lutheridge in Arden, North Carolina, as another example of extraordinary efforts rising above extraordinary challenges. “They were horribly damaged by Helene,” she said. “[Because] camp has a special place in many people’s hearts, there was an outpouring of alumni to help with cleanup.”

Despite the destruction, the camp has not stayed inwardly focused. “Even when they didn’t have running water or power, they said to the linemen who were coming in to repair the electrical wiring, ‘We don’t have a lot, in terms of amenities, but you can sleep here,’” Olson recounted. “[It’s] an example of radical hospitality that we can sometimes be really good at as Lutherans.”

Lutheridge staff are now considering how they can host volunteer teams as rebuilding efforts take root, she added.

Bridging Together, a collaboration between Lutheran Disaster Response and Mennonite Disaster Service, came about after the Mennonite agency’s executive director approached Maryn Olson to see if Lutheran Disaster Response would like to partner, Ruth Ann Sipe said. Now, she said, “we are working together to replace private bridges that were destroyed by the flood. There’s no state funding to replace those bridges because they’re on

private property.”

She estimated that some 5,000 bridges are out in North Carolina. That’s problematic for rural families who rely on bridges to get out and pick up necessities from town. Materials have been ordered for the first bridge, which will be built in Hendersonville, North Carolina, to help 16 families. The Bridging Together team hopes to begin building soon, once the permit is secured.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As construction projects ramp up, some families whose homes were destroyed by Helene look forward to new houses in their hometowns, while others have decided to relocate. For those staying, rebuilding can be an opportunity for “reversioning,” Olson said.

“As much hope as there is as people [look] forward to the future, this is a hard road ahead,” Olson said. “Well over 200 people died. Lest we forget that, it’s incredibly important that we give people, families and communities the time and space they need to grieve.”

Though the needs are great, the Sipes see the spirit at work in the new collaborations. There is a willingness to help that’s inspired them. “We’ve moved from that immediate response to a long-term response,” Ruth Ann Sipe said. “[The work is] unfolding. We’ll be here for a while.” 🌿

How to help

Pray: Prayers for recovery efforts are always needed.

Give: According to Lutheran Disaster Response’s Maryn Olson, gifts of money offer flexibility, autonomy and “a chance to take power back in a situation where people have been made very powerless by a storm.” She added: “Communities know what they need. They just don’t always have the resources to make it happen. That’s why gifts to Lutheran Disaster Response are so powerful.” **To donate funds to Lutheran Disaster Response, visit [ELCA.org/LDR](https://www.elca.org/LDR). No in-kind donations, please.**