POLICY FORUM: INVITED COMMENTARIES & SIDEBARS

Resilience Emerging through Faith: From Crisis Response to Lasting Recovery

Brandon Wilson[1]

[1] Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry

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On September 27, 2024, Hurricane Helene delivered a catastrophic blow to Western North Carolina, severely damaging infrastructure and displacing thousands, including over 160 Veterans at Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry's (ABCCM) Veterans Restoration Quarters. This article explores ABCCM's multifaceted disaster response and recovery efforts and introduces the new Faith360 Network. Together, these efforts offer a replicable and scalable model for community resilience that enhances access, coordination, and sustainability in post-disaster recovery—especially for vulnerable populations in the wake of disasters.

Introduction

Western North Carolina has long faced the threat of natural disasters, but the devastation wrought by Hurricane Helene on September 27th, 2024, was unprecedented. The storm crippled key infrastructures across Western North Carolina, including the Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry's (ABCCM) Veterans Restoration Quarters (VRQ), a 250-bed facility providing transitional housing for homeless veterans. This catastrophic loss displaced veterans and overwhelmed response efforts. However, through strategic resource mobilization, collaborative partnerships, and innovative outreach, ABCCM was able to immediately respond to community needs and develop plans for long-term recovery. ABCCM's long-term recovery work involves pioneering a new scalable model for disaster resilience and restoration.

This article describes ABCCM's crisis response to Hurricane Helene and highlights an innovative approach to long-term recovery for communities that leverages an established network of coordinated care. ABCCM's unique model of care maximizes faith-based communities and churches, while pairing with NCCARE360's established network and lessons learned over a decade of implementing this model. ABCCM's launch of the Faith360 Network—an innovative framework that merges NCServes with the power of a faith-based model that has a strong foundation of coordinated social care—will generate a blueprint for crisis response for the future.

Immediate Response

The destruction of the Veterans Restoration Quarters (VRQ) displaced over 160 Veterans as they were evacuated in the early morning hours of September 27th. The crisis response, led by local emergency services, National Guard troops, and nonprofit organizations, was swift, but underscored systemic challenges in disaster preparedness. Emergency housing, food distribution, and medical support were stretched thin. The lack of a centralized logistical hub for relief coordination became evident as organizations scrambled to distribute aid efficiently.

Days after the storm, Western North Carolina was blessed with an abundance of supplies, ranging from water to generators, and diapers to chainsaws. Western North Carolina churches became impromptu mini-distribution sites that supported vital resources in rural pockets where phone and internet outages, paired with road closures, exacerbated challenges. ABCCM was well-positioned to receive these materials for Western North Carolina and began receiving and delivering aid and resources, leveraging its 50,000-square-foot warehouse to act as a regional center for resource distribution. This facility became an essential node in disaster logistics, facilitating the storage, coordination, and delivery of vital supplies. The warehouse's role demonstrated the need for pre-positioned resources and, more importantly, a centralized distribution network for disaster preparedness. ABCCM began exploring how to collate their own resources and expertise with the community.

Building on an Established Framework

Addressing the Take-Up Gap

As Western North Carolina transitioned from crisis response to long-term recovery, it became clear that non-traditional outreach methods were needed to address the needs of vulnerable populations. Where traditional models of outreach and care are often 'reactive' or evidence-based, we learned that proactive and upstream strategies would be necessary to truly engage those most in need. This thought process would be the foundation of building on Project Delorean, which is highlighted in the "Project DeLorean White Paper" (2025).[1] Northwestern University's evaluation of this project exposed upstream strategies to address the critical "take-up gap"—the disparity between individuals eligible for social support programs and those who actually receive benefits. This gap, particularly pronounced among the Veteran population, stems from bureaucratic complexity, stigma, and lack of awareness of benefits.

Building on the success of Project Delorean, ABCCM is now building a validated, personalized outreach model and approach by proactively identifying and engaging high-need individuals through and with community partners rather than relying on them to seek assistance. This type of outreach

breaks down the stigma surrounding those in need by normalizing assistance as a community-driven effort rather than an individual shortcoming. By integrating support into larger initiatives or community projects, this approach reduces the hesitation and pride that often prevents Veterans from seeking help, making resources more accessible and accepted.

This take-up gap approach, originally developed in 2014 to connect Veterans and families to benefits and health care, is now providing a scalable framework for disaster recovery. The lessons learned underscored the importance of a proactive approach to caring for those most in need. As a community, we must take the lead in identifying better ways to connect individuals with available resources, rather than assuming everyone knows where to go or what to ask for. By fostering greater awareness and accessibility, we can ensure that support reaches those who need it most. Additionally, by embedding outreach within disaster recovery efforts, this approach ensures that aid is offered proactively, removing barriers to access and fostering a sense of community resilience, where seeking support is seen as a collective effort rather than a personal failure.

NCServes - An Established Model of Care

NCServes is the nation's first statewide coordinated care network connecting Veterans, service members, and their families with essential resources, including housing, employment, health care, and emergency assistance, ensuring seamless access to support through a collaborative, community-based approach. NCServes has served North Carolina Veterans since 2014. Originally funded by Syracuse University and the Wal-Mart Foundation, NCServes now supports over 8000 Veteran households annually, with support from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS); after a decade of work, the program is considered a national best practice that other states like Texas and Virgina are replicating.

Additionally, further validation supported the NCServes model, demonstrating the impact of a coordinated network of care.[2]A 2016 longitudinal study published in the *Journal of Social Services Research* by Washington University that examined the effectiveness of Missouri's 2-1-1 system found that only 36% of individuals received the assistance they needed when they were not connected to a coordinated network of care that contained both technology and community partners alignment.[3] In contrast, a recent 10-year report from Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families evaluated the impact of the NCServes model—specifically the network within the ABCCM model of care for Veterans seeking services. This study revealed a remarkable and consistent 80% resolution rate for those utilizing this coordinated care approach over a decade, underscoring the transformative power of integrated service delivery in ensuring timely and effective support for those in need.[4]

Insights from the Healthy Opportunities Pilots (HOP) Program

Incorporating insights from North Carolina's Healthy Opportunities Pilots (HOP) program, which addresses health-related social needs (HRSNs) through Medicaid, ABCCM is significantly enhancing community resilience and disaster recovery efforts.[5] The HOP program, as detailed by NCDHHS, is the nation's first comprehensive initiative to test and evaluate the impact of providing select evidence-based, non-medical interventions related to housing, food, transportation, and interpersonal safety to high-needs Medicaid enrollees.[6] As one of the many HOP providers in Western North Carolina, ABCCM ensured the continuous delivery of healthy food boxes within this program in the immediate aftermath of the crisis—not only addressing food insecurity but also offering hope and comfort to those in distress. This effort served as a gateway to identifying critical needs within the community, leading to an expansion of services facilitated through local churches.

This program, which reimburses community-based organizations for services that address critical social needs such as housing, food, transportation, and interpersonal violence, has become an essential pillar of recovery efforts. Its impact is evident in how organizations have strengthened their capacity, ultimately fostering greater community resilience. Without this program, ABCCM would not have been able to house more than 160 Veterans in the aftermath of the storm while continuing to provide vital services and programming. By sustaining this initiative and its comprehensive array of services, the program has not only ensured a steady stream of resources but has also instilled resilience and confidence in both service providers and the communities they support. HOP will continue to be a value-add and remain essential as we move into long-term recovery efforts.

Lessons from Faith Communities

ABCCM was founded in 1969 as a faith-based collaboration of local churches to bridge the racial divide and to serve individuals in crisis, providing food, clothing, and financial assistance. Over the decades, it expanded its outreach to include 7 ministries, such as Buncombe County's only free medical clinic; 2 free pharmacies; 3 transitional housing facilities (a 250-bed Veterans Restoration Quarters for male Veterans, a 100-bed Transformation Village for women and children, and a 50-bed Recovery Living Center for men in recovery); crisis support jail ministry; and a robust Veterans service portfolio through Veterans Services of the Carolinas, which spans across the entirety of North Carolina. All of the projects are rooted in Christian service. Today, ABCCM continues to mobilize volunteers and faith communities to address homelessness, poverty, and health care needs in North Carolina.

Lesson One: Immediate Response

In times of disaster, churches and faith-based communities serve as critical pillars of support, providing immediate relief and sanctuary to those affected. These communities often mobilize quickly, leveraging their established networks to distribute food, water, clothing, and medical assistance to those in need; most importantly, they are built on a foundation of trust. In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, many churches became the emotional anchors of their communities, opening their doors as emergency shelters and providing refuge for displaced individuals and families. These sanctuaries not only offered physical safety, but also nurtured emotional and spiritual well-being, bringing comfort and hope in a time of crisis.

Lesson 2: Shared Mission and Values of Community Coordination

With resources stretched thin due to disrupted transportation, limited drivers, and vehicle shortages caused by the storm, churches played a pivotal role in both packing and delivering food boxes, which supported the Healthy Opportunities Pilots program. Their involvement underscored the indispensable value of faith-based communities in disaster response, demonstrating how local congregations can mobilize swiftly to fill gaps in care and provide essential relief when it is needed most. Their deep-rooted presence in communities allows them to respond with compassion and efficiency, often filling gaps that governmental and other nonprofit agencies may struggle to address. Moreover, faith-based groups and churches seamlessly partnered with relief organizations—such as the American Red Cross, NC Baptist Men, Eight Days of Hope, and Samaritan's Purse, among others—adding to the coordination of efforts and ensuring that aid reached the most vulnerable populations in a timely and effective manner.

Lesson 3: Long-Term Mental and Emotional Health

Beyond the immediate response, churches and faith-based communities play an essential role in creating a community of trust and long-term recovery by providing emotional, psychological, and spiritual support. Disasters can leave lasting challenges, not only physically but also mentally and emotionally, and faith communities help individuals process grief, trauma, and loss through counseling, prayer, and communal solidarity. They foster resilience by encouraging hope and rebuilding a sense of belonging among those who have lost everything. Additionally, they often contribute to rebuilding efforts, offering volunteer labor, financial assistance, and long-term aid to help restore homes, businesses, and lives. Through their unwavering commitment to service, churches, no matter how big or small or their religious affiliation, continue to be beacons of stability and renewal in the aftermath of crisis.

Launching the Faith360 Network: A Scalable Recovery Model

In my 15+ years of providing health and human services, it is my experience that faith-based communities and churches are the most underutilized resources across the nation, yet they possess the most potential in supporting those most in need, particularly in disaster response. ABCCM, in collaboration with churches and faith-based partners, NCDHHS, and long-range planning groups, launched the Faith360 Network. This initiative mobilizes churches and faith-based organizations to serve as localized recovery hubs, ensuring that disaster survivors receive immediate, coordinated, and culturally competent support while leveraging the established network of NCCARE360 and the Coordination Center model.[7] Through philanthropic funding, ABCCM will support this effort by providing full-time staff and close collaboration with long-range planning groups, NCDHHS, and partner organizations.

Applying these principles to disaster recovery has led to the development of a framework that combines intentional outreach, centralized logistics, and community-driven support for a more effective and inclusive recovery process. This approach resulted in ABCCM's launch of the new long-term recovery network, integrating faith-based communities and churches into the existing system of care.

To launch the groundbreaking initiative—Faith360—ABCCM hosted over 100 faith-based organizations, churches, and community partners in 2 separate community-wide strategy sessions. Built to empower churches and faith-based communities, Faith360 provides the essential resources, training, and partnerships needed to deliver comprehensive, coordinated care to those affected by Hurricane Helene. The initiative will integrate churches into the NCCARE360 network of care while providing care coordination provided by ABCCM. By uniting faith communities in a shared mission of compassionate service, Faith360 strengthens local responses to pressing social needs while fostering resilience and transformation in the lives of individuals and families.

By adopting these strategies, the Faith360 Network will enhance its capacity to address the comprehensive needs of disaster-affected populations, leading to more effective and sustainable recovery outcomes. Faith360 offers:

Personalized support navigation. Care coordinators conduct detailed needs assessments and connect individuals to tailored services.

Faith-based communities and churches. Integration will support a foundation of trust and community while tapping into resources traditionally not employed.

Comprehensive referral networks. Through NCCARE360, individuals are linked to over 3500 service providers, ensuring rapid response and holistic support.

Intentional outreach. Using the Project DeLorean model,[1] high-risk individuals will be identified, and the "take-up gap" will be closed for those most in need.

The network will enhance sustainability by keeping entities engaged, recognizing that resources and funding fluctuate for organizations and churches. This structure allows some to temporarily step back and regroup while others step forward to serve, ensuring continuous support and adaptability within the community.

Conclusion: A Blueprint for Future Resilience

By leveraging the region's faith-based communities and churches, utilizing an established network of care, and launching the Faith360 Network, the region has created a scalable blueprint for community resilience. These programs and models have been instrumental in addressing the unique vulnerabilities of military-connected communities, providing critical support in housing, health care, employment, and mental health. However, their impact extends beyond Veterans, offering effective frameworks for assisting other at-risk groups, particularly in both short-term and long-term disaster relief. In the immediate aftermath of a crisis, these models deliver essential aid—such as emergency shelter, food, and medical care—while their long-term strategies focus on rebuilding lives through sustainable housing, job training, and mental health support. This approach not only enhances immediate disaster response but also establishes a long-term recovery infrastructure that can be replicated nationwide. By prioritizing collaborative networks, faith-based engagement, and proactive outreach, ABCCM and connected communities will create resilient support systems that ensure no vulnerable population is left behind in future crises.

The story of Western North Carolina's recovery is not finished. However, it serves as a powerful reminder: resilience is not just about rebuilding—it's about building smarter, stronger, and together.

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Disclosure of interests

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