

POLICY FORUM: INTRODUCTION

Hurricane Helene Response Brings Out the Best to Ensure Stability in Western North Carolina

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On September 27th of 2024, Western North Carolina experienced the devastation of Hurricane Helene, which led to the deaths of at least 107 people and contributed to nearly \$60 billion in financial impacts.^{1,2} The storm led to the disruption of every major service in the region, health care, utilities, schools, businesses, places of worship and many, many more. While our state is no stranger to natural disasters—especially along the East Coast—no one could have imagined that Western North Carolina would be vulnerable to such a massive storm, let alone one with the enormity of force that Hurricane Helene carried as it came up from the Gulf of Mexico. Unless you have been through such a disaster, it is difficult to fully grasp how challenging it can be to have to experience life without electricity, drinkable water, internet and cell service, and passable roads. While the area has made incredible strides in such a short amount of time, much more effort will be needed in the coming months and even years to fully restore all that was taken away by the storm.

We at the *North Carolina Medical Journal* felt it was critical to share with our readers the heroic efforts that have gone into this remarkable recovery. This collection of commentaries takes you to the front lines of Western North Carolina in the post-Hurricane Helene era to show not only the devastation but also the incredible resilience and resourcefulness of the people in the region. As you will see from our contributors, it “took a village” to overcome the infrastructural damage to get back to even a functional normal. Public and private agencies have risen to the challenge to meet the needs of their constituents and are going above and beyond to ensure that resources are being provided where they are needed. In this issue, we learn valuable lessons from Eastern North Carolina as well, a region that has long dealt with devastating storms and recovery efforts.

We as North Carolinians can be proud not only of how the residents of Western North Carolina have overcome such an incredibly difficult challenge, but also of how people and agencies from across the state have provided time, talent, and resources to support their fellow North Carolinians. While we know it’s only a matter of time before our state is hit by another natural

disaster, the lessons we are learning from Western North Carolina and other impacted regions will make us better prepared to come out stronger on the other side.

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