

STATE BOARD OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Post Helene Risk Mitigation and Disaster Recovery Assessment

Background

September 26-27, 2024, Hurricane Helene made landfall on the Florida Gulf Coast as a category 4 storm. The largest impacts from Helene were felt in the southern Appalachians, specifically Western North Carolina. This storm caused severe and unprecedented flooding that led to hundreds of fatalities and billions in property loss or damage. Mud slides and high winds also caused severe devastation across the western portion of NC. In addition, portions of Eastern North Carolina and South Carolina were hit by a total of six confirmed tornadoes.

Following the storm, 40 North Carolina counties were included in a major disaster declaration by the President of the United States under the Stafford Act as eligible for individual Assistance and Public Assistance Categories A and B or A-G as a result of Hurricane Helene. These counties represent 14 North Carolina Community College service areas. 6 of the 14 colleges were determined to be the most impacted colleges (in bold below).

Impacted Colleges included: **Asheville-Buncombe Technical College**, **Blue Ridge Community College**, Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute, Catawba Valley Community College, Cleveland Community College, Gaston Community College, **Haywood Community College**, Isothermal Community College, **Mayland Community College**, **McDowell Community College**, Southwestern Community College, Tri-County Community College, **Western Piedmont Community College** and Wilkes Community College.

One year later, Western North Carolina continues to work through the aftermath and recovery from this devastating storm. At the November 2024 meeting of the Accountability and Audit Committee, it was recommended that an after-crisis analysis be conducted regarding Hurricane Helene. It was recommended that this analysis include both System Office actions as well as lessons learned from impacted colleges.

Over the past year, System Office staff in collaboration with the John M. Belk Endowment has conducted a post Helene Assessment. This document contains a summary of lessons learned and recommended action steps.

Critical Challenges

Numerous challenges were posed by this storm and the unique terrain of the NC mountains; however, the challenges related to this storm are relevant for identifying future risk and gleaned lessons learned to mitigate risk. Critical challenges included:

- Universal communication breakdown
- Loss of power, water, cell towers and fiber.
- Unavailable Cash and payment processing.
- Business Continuity Plans and contact information were inaccessible due to lack of internet connectivity.
- Limited funding available to cover immediate needs.
- Lack of processes for addressing parttime employee payment
- Community needs for staging and housing emergency responders turned many campuses into command centers that provided space for staging, supply distribution and housing .
- Emotional and physical toll on impacted citizens, first responders and college staff cannot be underestimated. Many individuals responding to the crisis were also experiencing personal crisis.

Lessons Learned

- Connections and Contacts:
 - o Relationships with local emergency managers, utility providers, healthcare providers and local government officials are critical in a crisis.
 - o Collaboration with other colleges is essential to share resources.
- Staffing
 - o Crisis response teams must have multiple individuals with the knowledge to ensure business continuity and prevent burnout.
 - o Disaster training is important for leaders and staff.
 - o Be aware of the hidden cost of disaster recovery both emotional and physical.
- Communications
 - o Essential Continuity plans and contact information must be available both on and offline.
 - o Infrastructure redundancy must be in place.
 - o Cloud based infrastructure can minimize disruption.

- Cash and Funding
 - o Cash availability is essential for needs immediately following the event.
 - o Flexible funding is needed for unexpected and unplanned expenses.
- System Support and Policy Flexibility
 - o Regulatory flexibility is needed to manage extraordinary circumstances.
 - o Centralized and coordinated communication from the system level is important to understanding needs and coordinating responses and advocacy.
 - o Rapid Response support teams are needed to help colleges.
- Visibility and In Person Support

In the months following the disaster, affected campuses reported limited in-person engagement from system office leadership, with minimal on-site visits during the critical early recovery period when firsthand assessment of conditions would have been most valuable. It is recommended that the system office staff and State Board prioritize visiting impacted community colleges as soon as practicable post-disaster.

Recommended Actions and Next Steps

- Develop a Tool Kit for Disaster Preparedness and Recovery
 - o The tool kit will include one-page summaries that provide an overview of guiding questions, considerations and resources.
 - o Guidance for best practices in disaster preparation for use in new president's orientation and as a reference for existing leaders.
- Develop and deliver Tabletop Exercises to college teams that promote disaster training and preparation.
 - o Training exercises will focus on natural disaster planning and preparation. Training currently exists for active shooter training and other types of emergencies however most current training does not include natural disaster scenarios. Training will be developed in partnership with Emergency Management and Public Safety partners.
- Develop and document System Office response protocols to include rapid response support teams, onsite presence and visibility, policy flexibility, funding and advocacy support.