



**Dudley Flood Center for
Educational Equity and
Opportunity**

Equity Considerations for Hurricane Disaster Relief

The Dudley Flood Center for Educational Equity & Opportunity would like to thank Dr. Tiece Ruffin and all the Western North Carolina Community members who helped develop this resource. The Flood Center will continue collaborating with community members to highlight important equity considerations and the needs of historically marginalized communities for impactful long-term recovery efforts.

Historical Connections:

On the evening of September 26th, 2024, Hurricane Helene made landfall as a [Category 4](#) storm. The storm's strong wind gusts and severe flooding caused unprecedented damage to communities across Western North Carolina (WNC). This is not the first time WNC communities have been affected by severe storms. In 1916, "[The Flood by Which All Other Floods are Measured](#)" hit, causing devastating flooding that cut off contact with the rest of the world. After the Flood in 1916, a detailed emergency preparedness plan was created to address the potential impacts of severe storms. Despite these efforts, in 2004, tropical storms Ivan and Frances caused \$7 million in damage across seven counties.

Much like after these natural disasters, North Carolina has begun the recovery process to rebuild communities and implement supports that will hopefully prevent such devastation. While disaster relief efforts have already started, the long-term impacts of Helene on children and families will continue to be assessed. Below, we have outlined prominent equity considerations for North Carolina as we move forward.

Prominent Equity Considerations:

After every natural disaster, communities experience devastating losses, face years of recovery efforts, and suffer millions of dollars in damage. As communities move forward in recovering from the catastrophic impacts of Hurricane Helene, we as a state have to use an equity lens when considering how to support Western North Carolinians.

Impacts on Communities of Color:

[Western North Carolina is becoming increasingly diverse, with African Americans making up 20% and Latinos making up 10% of the population.](#) While the history of the [African American community](#) in WNC can be traced back hundreds of years, the Latin(x) community has grown since [2010](#). Despite WNC becoming increasingly diverse, communities of color in the region are small and often overlooked and underserved. Although there is recognition that effective disaster planning and relief must engage and address the diverse needs of every community, historically marginalized communities are frequently disregarded or, at times, exploited. It must also be acknowledged that while these communities may know about available support(s), structural exist, such as a lack of understanding of how to connect to emergency networks and systems.

The tendency for these communities to garner less attention and face barriers accessing necessary resources. highlights the need to provide intentional support that ultimately results in equitable resource allocation.

Recommendations:

<i>Policy, Research, and Advocacy</i>	<i>Partnerships</i>
Universities should develop research agendas that focus on partnering with BIPOC lead and focused community organizations to understand the long-term impacts of natural disasters on communities of color and develop interventions.	Build intentional partnerships with organizations serving communities of color to provide support, such as the YMI Cultural Center , Asheville City Schools Foundation , Beloved Asheville , The Racial Justice Coalition , or The Color of Asheville .
<i>Capacity Building and Convening of Stakeholders</i>	<i>Outreach, Communications, and Dissemination</i>
Philanthropic agencies should focus their grant-making on achieving equitable outcomes and support organizations based in WNC to strengthen the region's capacity.	Actively seek and elevate the voices of communities of color to understand their needs in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene. This includes providing news coverage from residents in historically African American, Indigenous, and Latinx communities.

Increased Poverty and Homelessness:

[Residents across WNC are facing a housing crisis due to the damage caused by Hurricane Helene and the already challenging housing shortage in the region.](#) Severe winds and flooding from the storm caused structural damage to roofs, the demolition of homes, and interior damage to buildings generally. Many who did not completely lose their homes or encounter severe structural damage now cannot access clean drinking water, running water, or electricity and are encountering mold and washed-out roads. As of October 23rd, 2024, more than 120,000 homes have been damaged, resulting in more than \$12 billion in overall damage.

This becomes even more chilling when one considers that in places such as Asheville, where renters occupy 31% of the housing, many people are still obligated to pay to stay in homes that do not meet residents' basic needs. Unfortunately, the number of evictions is expected to rise over the coming months, with an understanding that these residents will most likely be displaced. Although FEMA has provided temporary shelter assistance, those who qualify are placed in South Carolina or Tennessee. While temporary shelter assistance is a great resource, those who qualify for this assistance will lose access to their source of income, and students will have their education disrupted. Those who cannot access such assistance programs will face barriers to adequate housing, clean water, appropriate health care, economic mobility, and educational opportunities.

These immediate impacts beg the question: How can we provide support that addresses the immediate and long-term impacts on students and families?

<p><i>Policy, Research, and Advocacy</i></p> <p>Local universities and those within the UNC System should extend college application waivers for students in hurricane-affected counties and expand the additional financial aid to eligible students to address the economic barriers to accessing postsecondary attainment.</p> <p>Many are reporting that recovery efforts will most likely extend well into 2025. State entities such as NC DHHS should extend waivers such as the Timely Reporting waiver and hot foods waiver, as well as assistance such as SNAP to account for the needs that will extend past the end of 2024.</p> <p>Schools across WNC are either closed indefinitely or working to restore building power, displacing students and staff. Legislators should work with State Board members to provide funding and policies to support schools and students throughout recovery.</p>	<p><i>Partnerships</i></p> <p>Create coalitions of organizations, such as FEMA and the Western NC Housing Partnership, that address housing and economic barriers. These coalitions should focus on addressing gaps in services and developing long-term strategies, especially for communities of color.</p> <p>As communities face barriers in accessing essential goods such as food and personal hygiene products, nonprofits should work to highlight the needs of diverse communities, such as multicultural hair care products, feminine hygiene products, and foods that support dietary diversity.</p>
<p><i>Capacity Building and Convening of Stakeholders</i></p> <p>Philanthropic entities should join their peers, such as Dogwood Health Trust and CoThinkk, which have already begun to invest in relief efforts that support communities' most immediate needs and strategies that will result in long-term recovery across WNC.</p>	<p><i>Outreach, Communications, and Dissemination</i></p> <p>Local news outlets should partner with community leaders and housing agencies to communicate resources and assistance opportunities via alternative methods such as radio as communities work to restore power and connectivity.</p> <p>All communication efforts should be available in languages commonly used in the area, especially for Spanish-speaking and Indigenous families and communities.</p>

Language Barriers and Support for English Language Learners:

As North Carolina continues to work to support WNC communities with effective disaster planning and relief, we must ensure that we are engaging our immigrant and English-language learners in ways that address their concerns and foster trust. In the aftermath of many natural disasters, immigrant families and communities often encounter the loss of documented proof of immigration status needed to gain access to government assistance and employment. This results in the loss of stable housing, increased isolation, lack of access to appropriate health care, education, and the threat of deportation. Even with

the proper documentation, these communities often cannot access assistance programs designed to provide relief after natural disasters.

The lack of access to health care, increased fear of deportation, and separation from family members prompt the development of strategies to engage and support linguistically diverse communities effectively.

<p><i>Policy, Research, and Advocacy</i></p> <p>Advocate for policies and legislation that do not require unnecessary questions around immigration status and include provisions designed to safeguard the loss of immigration status.</p> <p>All federal agencies should comply with Executive Order 13166 by implementing a language assistance plan for all federally conducted activities.</p> <p>Work with community leaders to ensure that immigrant students and families know their rights and how to advocate for their communities.</p>	<p><i>Partnerships</i></p> <p>Partner with trusted community agencies and leaders, such as Powder EMMA, to provide resources and support to foster better relationships with immigrant families and decrease fear of engagement with law enforcement.</p> <p>Collaborate with immigrant families and communities in a culturally sensitive and affirming manner to develop strong trusting relationships that enable partners to provide necessary support and resources.</p>
<p><i>Capacity Building and Convening of Stakeholders</i></p> <p>Collaborate and convene community advocacy groups to develop more inclusive and accessible disaster and relief planning.</p>	<p><i>Outreach, Communications, and Dissemination</i></p> <p>All written and verbal communication materials should be translated in advance to any language best understood by the community.</p> <p>To ensure accessibility, emphasis should be placed on both written and verbal communication on diverse platforms, such as the Internet, radio, flyers, etc.</p>

Safety, Mental Health, and Wellbeing Supports:

Research shows that natural disasters negatively impact both mental and physical health. Often, the emotional toll caused by these events can be even more devastating than the physical aspects. Children, specifically, can suffer from trauma much longer than we realize and often have physical representations of their emotions. The trauma can frequently affect relationships, academic performance, and, if not addressed, later life outcomes.

Due to the structural damage in WNC, many communities and families lack access to the necessary immediate and long-term support to address their safety concerns and healthcare needs. As with any disaster, we must support families and youth with equitable, trauma-informed support and strategies.

<p><i>Policy, Research, and Advocacy</i></p>	<p><i>Partnerships</i></p>
<p>Develop policies and legislation that provide funding for students and families access to health</p>	<p>Partner with state agencies to develop programs that support families enrolled in state benefits</p>

care and mental health support immediately after the disaster and in the long term. Advocate for policies that remove unnecessary barriers and support more subsidized programs that allow families to access healthcare.	such as Medicaid, child care assistance, and mental health services. Schools can partner with local agencies and faith-based organizations to create a community care system that offers assistance in accessing child care, health care, and counseling.
<i>Capacity Building and Convening of Stakeholders</i>	<i>Outreach, Communications, and Dissemination</i>
State funding can be directed toward providing more school social workers, counselors, nurses, and psychologists to address students' and families' physical and mental health concerns. Local agencies should work with schools to provide educators and staff with trauma-informed training to address the trauma experienced by staff and students. Special emphasis should also be placed on securing diverse educators who are trained to support diverse communities.	Work with local agencies and leaders to disseminate communication around preventative measures to avoid potential health factors, such as exposure to mold and infected water supplies.

Access Educational Resources and Opportunities:

The devastation caused by Hurricane Helene severely impacted schools and districts, hindering their ability to provide safe learning environments and access to educational resources. Many schools were closed due to the lack of power, water, internet, cell service, and safe roads. In response, numerous educators and school personnel stepped up as volunteer first responders, offering transportation, food, and other essential supplies.

As schools continue to address the long-term effects of COVID-19, educators are returning to their classrooms with the pressing responsibility of creating safe, inclusive, and trauma-informed environments that support learning. Research indicates that teachers are the most influential factor in student learning, yet students must now contend with the trauma from the hurricane and reduced access to educational opportunities and materials.

Students and educators in Western North Carolina (WNC) will require ongoing support to ensure that students have access to safe, culturally relevant environments. These environments are crucial for helping students develop the critical skills necessary for their success and well-being.

<i>Policy, Research, and Advocacy</i>	<i>Partnerships</i>
Local agencies should collaborate with communities to identify representatives who can advocate for equitable funding for public schools. This will be an urgent need as more funding is directed toward vouchers for private schools. As many educators will face many of the same concerns as their students, legislators should	Collaborate with PTAs, universities, and community organizations to develop practices and strategies for engaging with families in authentic and affirming ways that promote trust and support.

advocate for adequate funding for teachers who may need access to childcare, health care, housing, or drinkable water.	
<i>Capacity Building and Convening of Stakeholders</i>	<i>Outreach, Communications, and Dissemination</i>
Funders should focus on funding professional learning opportunities around a culturally responsive curriculum, trauma-informed curriculum, and trauma-informed strategies.	As students and families may lack access to the internet and many roads are still unsafe, schools must develop communication strategies that reach each family; for example, many schools can establish phone trees that allow them to work with communities to get important information out.

Resources:

1. [Perspective | Our young children and their child care programs need Helene relief funding](#)
2. [Many schools are still closed weeks after Hurricane Helene. Teachers worry about long-term impact | The Associated Press.](#)
3. [Natural Disaster State Policy Recommendations](#)
4. [Hurricane Helene - Dogwood Health Trust](#)
5. [North Carolina -- and WNC -- became more diverse, census data shows](#)
6. [Hurricane Helene Food and Nutrition Services \(FNS\) Flexibilities | NCDHHS](#)
7. [Students impacted by hurricane will receive extra scholarship support – UNC System](#)
8. [Application fees waived for students in hurricane-affected counties – UNC System](#)
9. [NC school systems in storm's wake struggle to adapt](#)
10. [Addressing the Needs of Immigrants and Limited English Communities in Disaster Planning and Relief](#)
11. [Flood Resources | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
12. [Natural Disasters](#)
13. [The serious and long-lasting impact of disaster on schoolchildren - The Washington Post](#)
14. [For Educators: Supporting Undocumented Students & Their Families](#)
15. [Together we rise: From the mountains to the coast, school districts join together to support our return to school](#)