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County Post Hurricane Helene Response and Recovery Experience and Feedback

Prepared by County Manager Jaime Laughter for the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management Hearing, March 24, 2025

This document is intended to provide constructive feedback with our conclusive statements in bold and explanation of the elements of the response and recovery experience in Transylvania County post Hurricane Helene that led us to those conclusions. We have included suggestions for improvements from our perspective. The appendices included provide backup documentation to this document but are not the full scope of documented and undocumented communication that has occurred between Transylvania County and FEMA.

Statement 1: When a widespread disaster occurs, there must be a system in place to support response and recovery because local governments do not have the capacity to maintain the ability to handle a response at that scale during non-response times. Overall, FEMA staff our county engaged with seemed genuine in their desire to help, but faced some of the same frustrations with communication, procedures, processes, and difficulty navigating the system as we did. Any redesign of a system to deliver that support needs to prioritize the local government voice, be adaptable to different conditions and ensure responsiveness to local needs during and after disaster.

This document expresses the experience and frustrations that we faced with FEMA because that is the jurisdiction of the hearing, but we recognize that in some situations there seemed to be blame to be shared for difficulties between both state and federal agencies, but our main concern is that the system work at the point of delivery locally and we do not have a clear perspective on how the interface between state and federal helped or hindered the response. County government is the closest governance to our citizens and the very people who form local government live disasters alongside the community while also responding. There must be response infrastructure to support those efforts from other levels of government.

Statement 2: Transylvania County was left to manage emergency response without FEMA in early days and did not get FEMA support until numerous and repeated phone calls and emails were made to appeal for assistance. Even our federal legislators were puzzled by the delay in FEMA arriving or responding. No official reason has ever been offered, but this delayed citizens' being able to start the application process, left local resources strained without information and lowered confidence in the FEMA response from the beginning with our leaders and our community.

No FEMA representatives were present in Transylvania County until 9 days after Hurricane Helene created the worst disaster to hit our area in over 100 years. Flooding, landslides, and wind/tree damage left our county looking and feeling like a war zone with the vast majority without power, without communication and with devastating damage. Our Emergency Operations Center (EOC) received one phone call on day 6 from a FEMA representative stating they would be on site the following day without any arrival or additional call. Receiving any level of service took constant advocacy meaning some of our local resources were spent trying to get FEMA to engage instead of accomplishing other response activities. Status of damage incurred, and needs were communicated for days without response.

When I discussed the delay with one FEMA worker, they suggested the lack of assistance uptake from our county, such as those utilizing Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA), made it appear as if there was less need in our community because of low reported utilization of TSA. This seems like it could be a factor, and the data does reflect a lower measure of initial assistance uptake; however, data reports did not accurately convey the reasons people were not accepting assistance. Data points from these reports may still be limited in understanding the full impact of Helene in our county. Even damage assessment figures were slow to reflect total impact because flooding could be easily identified by inspecting floodplain areas, but our county suffered landslide and tree damage to homes that were spread out across the county and took longer to inventory.

I recently spoke with a county manager on the other side of the disaster in North Carolina that indicated they were not even sure why they were in the disaster declaration because they saw very little impact from the storm, but that FEMA representatives arrived promptly and unannounced right after the storm. The only other plausible reason for the delay we have been able to identify is that the main operation was put in Hickory, NC and our county was one of the furthest away from that base; but plenty of FEMA staff were in neighboring Buncombe and Henderson counties well before arriving here and even present in some counties during the storm. The FEMA shelter set up immediately at the NC Agriculture Center is less than 15 minutes from our county line.

Statement 3: Both short- and long-term housing response processes instilled in FEMA are not suited to be effective in rural America or in environments like the mountains. This created a disconnect in the practical connection of those who needed help and the options available to them with specific issues around what those options meant for their families. A lesson learned in our experience is that the FEMA data around assistance uptake in long term housing does not adequately reflect degree of need in a community and that options that allow people to stay on their own property would have been more supportive and utilized. Policy makers should consider how protocols apply in different settings with the ability to be responsive to communities, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach.

Once life safety is secured in an emergency, our priorities pivot to the basic immediate human needs of clean water, food, and shelter. The Temporary Shelter Assistance (TSA) program, FEMA's first line of assistance to those displaced from their homes, is not set up to provide immediate assistance in rural areas because the availability of major hotel chains, capacity and established contracts are inconsistent or unavailable completely. Our citizens who applied for assistance and were approved for TSA in the initial weeks following the disaster found that the closest availability for hotels accepting the TSA program were in Charlotte, NC, or Greenville, SC, requiring anywhere between a 1- and 3-hour drive away from their homes, jobs, and schools. The TSA numbers for our county do not reflect the ultimate

need for housing after the storm because many were not willing to uproot their lives and either stayed with friends and family or in their damaged homes. We saw the most success for immediate housing needs with North Carolina Emergency Management and nonprofits that were able to secure RV units for households that could be placed at damaged home sites quickly and that did not require meeting floodplain elevation standards and other more stringent restrictions since they are mobile units. Unfortunately, those resources were not robust enough to assist to the full extent needed; however, similar resources could be an improved option in rural emergency response both for immediate needs and for the longer term while households navigate the lengthy process of determining whether to tear down, rebuild, relocate, etc.

FEMA housing leadership met with us to explain the options coming for our residents and explained that long-term housing implementation would take time. The long-term housing program has requirements that take a significant amount of time to deploy, with some of those found to be unrealistic for our community; so, there was no interim support unless citizens wanted to leave the area to use TSA. Rental assistance is one of the easier options, but there was an existing lack of rentals before the storm in our county. FEMA housing leadership explained that HUD's fair market rents are used to determine rental assistance limits early in our conversations. We provided a history of advocacy and data that shows that the methodology to estimate rural community fair market rent levels is not an accurate depiction of our county. FEMA representatives heard us on this issue and raised the request to increase the amount allowed. Even with an approval of doubling the fair market rent allowance, our county only saw 10 units immediately available under those limits. Households that pursued rental assistance and FEMA workers had challenges finding units within the limits. Addressing FMR helped the housing mission because it was responsive to the local characteristics of the community.

For long term housing, FEMA units could not be placed in the floodplain, but the homeowners who needed a unit to allow them to repair or to have time to go through hazard mitigation/buy out processes to determine their best options are in the floodplain and could not use the FEMA units unless they could find property outside of the floodplain for placement. Most of the commercial mobile home parks are in or near the floodplain because in the mountains, floodplains provide flat land that can be developed and used for those purposes. Additionally, the mobile home parks had limited availability due to the pre-existing short housing supply. Our county even pulled tax record data to provide all commercial mobile home park sites in the county to FEMA personnel to facilitate locating sites, and few were identified as possibilities for either available space or for being in the floodplain.

People in our rural community did not want to leave their homes; around half those qualifying for long-term housing chose to stay in their damaged dwellings, as reflected in FEMA data, often because the options offered were not realistic. Even the federally owned campground in Pisgah National Forest was eventually excluded as a mass housing site because it is in a floodplain, despite it being a federally owned site and easily accessible in our county. Additionally, the logistics baked into the long-term housing unit placement—such as required inspections to meet standardized requirements—are lengthy processes even under ideal circumstances. The first FEMA unit placed in our county saw an over two-week delay because the fire suppression unit was not working, leading to attempted repairs and eventual replacement. Typical mobile home placements under building code do not even have similar fire suppression units.

Communication was a challenge in housing planning and response as detailed in another section, but systemic issues of policy, procedure and protocol were apparent once communication improved, and the requirements were understood locally. Weekly calls—which we established with NCEM and FEMA in December after repeated communication frustrations expressed by the county manager—were instrumental in getting consistent information on housing, understanding of the rules (such as learning that sites in the floodplain would be rejected) and having clear status updates on those being approved for housing and the process being followed. While it is our perspective that the process needs to be made more responsive and efficient with fewer obstacles, understanding the rules made the participation of local officials more effective and the communication with the public clearer.

Statement 4: Some processes were overly complicated, costing time and diverting resources from areas that would have addressed more immediate needs in the local community. This also created barriers to providing efficient and effective service, in addition to eroding trust in FEMA as a response partner.

An example of these overly complex processes occurred when we offered a conference room to house a Disaster Resource Center (DRC) to get one operational in our county. The site visit required review of the conference room to see if it could be used for a DRC involving at least 7 FEMA representatives on the site visit and, while here, a call had to be made to see if a handicapped bathroom stall in our public county government building being an inch too short could be approved in order for the DRC to locate. After over a week post-inspection and multiple follow-ups from our staff, we were finally cleared to get a DRC. We were then told on a Tuesday that the DRC would soft open on a Thursday, with staff and resources arriving on Thursday morning, and then officially open on Friday. We scheduled our county operations and IT staff to be available to assist for Thursday. Wednesday morning, we were contacted by our staff in that building that FEMA representatives were there to set up the DRC. We diverted our operations and IT staff immediately to assist, only to find that the people to staff the DRC had been sent to our location, but that the equipment necessary to operate had been sent to another county so setup could not occur that day. Later that day, a higher-level FEMA official assigned fault to the county for the failure to open on time, even though the issue was caused by FEMA staff and required equipment being sent to two different places.

When teams arrived to go door to door in impacted neighborhoods, we assigned a county staff person to accompany them for the two days we were told they would be going door to door. (Note: A third day they scheduled without informing county staff resulted in an incident referenced elsewhere in this report.) Including a county staff member on the visits was to help assure our citizens that these were not scams and to facilitate getting assistance to more of our households. While in one neighborhood, a homeowner came up to the team and said he knew an elderly man in one of the houses needed help with the application. He offered to go let the man know the team was coming and then came back to let them know he spoke to the man, who was ready and waiting to receive help. When the team got to the driveway, one of the FEMA workers stated they could not go to the door because there was a no solicitation sign and started to move on to the next house. While it is understandable to avoid issues with no trespass or no solicitation signs, there must be some flexibility when it is clear that help is welcomed, like in this situation.

Statement 5: Siloed internal FEMA communications and no clear communication protocols, along with inconsistent communication to the County Level Emergency Operations Center, created barriers and

frustration. Communication challenges seemed to frustrate FEMA staff themselves when they worked with us to find answers to questions or connect to resources. Prior communication directly with counties before an event occurs and not just coordination through state without engagement of local government would improve this by establishing relationships in advance. This could be even more effective by having non-emergency regular opportunities for training and relationship building.

Communication between federal, state, and local governments and communication within FEMA posed challenges. Multiple examples throughout the response showcase those challenges; a few include:

*After receiving a phone call from FEMA to our EOC that someone would be coming the next day and then seeing two days pass with no arrivals, the county manager reached out to Congressman Edward's office to ask who we could contact at FEMA because we were still without support. A name and number were provided, and the county manager called that number. She was then handed off because the "internal affairs person" for our county had changed multiple times in the same day. Transylvania County staff communicated via phone and email with the internal affairs liaison assigned to the county once that person was finally identified. When the local government liaison arrived in person, it was a different person than anyone who had been identified days before, with no communication with us at the local level that a change had occurred. We also found none of the information we had shared prior had been passed to the new person. Details can be found in the timeline attached.

*The FEMA coordinator for our county arrived at our EOC on day 9, but with no communication to indicate he was coming that day. He began engaging with county staff to understand needs and submitting reports into some system, but did not seem to be getting any answers or information back. On day 13, the internal affairs liaison arrived with no prior communication to the FEMA coordinator already there; because the coordinator was unaware anyone else was coming, he could not coordinate the meeting who had no prior knowledge of the arrival. This prevented him from coordinating with our leadership.

*The Sheriff for our county is part of county government with the county manager, and his office is in the same building as the EOC. On numerous occasions, the county manager was told that FEMA teams were *not* going door to door, while Sheriff Chuck Owenby was receiving phone calls from a FEMA representative in Washington, DC, telling him teams *were* going door to door. This resulted in contradictory messages being pushed out to county residents. Both leaders shared with FEMA representatives that this was unacceptable, but the issue occurred and even damaging to have mixed messages, but it occurred at least two more times, and further confusion was only averted because the manager and Sheriff were coordinating locally with each other to prevent the contradictions from confusing the public. A FEMA representative from DC also called Transylvania County dispatch asking racially inappropriate questions referencing a racially charged incident that allegedly occurred four days prior that was never reported or documented with Transylvania County. See timeline and CAD report included in attachment.

*Transylvania County staff was given four different instructions for how to submit possible housing sites and followed all of them in the first six weeks after the storm. The concern over housing challenges in the community was communicated in writing prior to any FEMA staff arriving, because county staff were well aware of the lack of rentals and the challenges with available housing prior to the storm. County staff continued to raise the question about sites, including an easily accessible campground in the federally owned Pisgah National Forest and two private sites owners had offered for consideration.

When county staff inquired about the status of the consideration of these sites for housing, FEMA staff would provide a new, different method to submit the sites for review, and there appeared to be no continuity of information shared among FEMA staff. After the manager requested weekly calls on housing with FEMA and NCEM representatives in December, the first meeting began with a discussion of the status of those sites being considered. The FEMA representative on the call pulled up a database which did not have any of the sites submitted by the county in it, meaning none of the site submittal pathways given previously had worked. The lack of clear pathways and having to re-explain community conditions around housing meant time and effort from our team that could have been spent addressing other recovery issues.

Statement 6: Changing contacts and inconsistent handoff of information established shaky infrastructure that impacted communication, trust in partnership and efficiency. We had to re-explain our local needs, challenges, culture and practical information over and over again without getting answers to questions or progress on addressing issues. A solid human resource infrastructure is necessary to make collaboration effective.

The timeline included in this report reflects examples of FEMA contacts being changed, often with no notice to the county EOC staff that a change was being made. Additionally, staff handoff of information was inconsistent, ranging from no transfer of information at all to a written handoff report and coordinated meetings. When an effective handoff occurred, it relieved local staff from the resource drain of having to keep re-orienting new FEMA representatives. An example of a handoff being well done in the timeline was Heather Long, who organized a handoff meeting and prepared a status report to review with the incoming replacement, as well as scheduling a meeting with county staff to introduce the incoming replacement and ensure information on challenges, current issues and needs was addressed in the meeting. The re-orientation required by local staff when those handoffs were not well facilitated was frustrating, time consuming and demoralizing to county staff, in addition to stalling progress of the response.

Statement 7: Conflicting guidance for public assistance process and items eligible for reimbursement created confusion and frustration. It also led to decisions being made on faulty information to spend local funds or make decisions on resource usage based on erroneous information that may create additional financial impact to the county budget already impacted by the impacts of the disaster.

The impact of contradicting and changing guidance on the county has been challenging and creates financial risk for the county. Guidance about reimbursable expenses created additional resource devotion to tracking expenses that would later be said could not be reimbursed. Early direction included that the local volunteer fire departments had to file their own public assistance only to find later that they could have fallen under the county's effort, meaning they had to figure out how to navigate that process or chose not to seek reimbursement due to the amount of resources it would take to pursue it.

Some of the contradictions and financial impact to the county were county resources used by FEMA and the Red Cross in the response. We did not charge FEMA or Red Cross rent on any of our properties used for shelters or DRC locations because staff recalled being told during a meeting the County would be able to claim dates of use and be reimbursed per square foot for the space used. This would offset utilities and programs that had to be cancelled from those locations so that those functions could occupy the space in response and recovery. After the DRC closed and all shelters closed, we added this information to our Cat B expenses and were then told this was not reimbursable despite the earlier

guidance. We were told by PDMG we should have created a rental agreement with FEMA and Red Cross before they moved into those spaces to recoup the cost of our operations. There is no reimbursable claim for our facilities being inaccessible to regular entities renting space or programs that had to be cancelled. We had similar conflicting guidance on covering fees on behalf of survivors for debris disposal, permit fees for repair and other expenses that have a direct impact on county resources and budget.

Statement 8: The Just in Time training approach in the field was frustrating because there was not anyone available with broader knowledge and training, which impacted trust with county citizens. To be effective, this training method requires a readily accessible lead with a broader knowledge of disaster management.

An example of just-in-time training having an ineffective result occurred with the FEMA teams sent to go door to door for applications. County management was initially told the teams would be able to assist people who had applied and either did not know the status of their application or had been rejected and needed help. Instead, the teams told residents they would have to call the FEMA 1-800 number for any questions. Residents were not able to get through on the hotline and reported waiting hours, only to get disconnected (possibly because communications across the county were running on temporary cell infrastructure due to the storm damage). In speaking with those on the FEMA teams, we learned they had received “just in time training” and were only trained to help fill out applications. They could not assist beyond the form or even refer for assistance beyond the 1-800 number. While just in time training can be an efficient tool for deployment of resources, teams are ineffective if there is not someone deployed alongside that has broader information and context to support the services being delivered. The inability to assist beyond filling in information on tablets and referring to the hotline frustrated citizens and made them lose confidence in the FEMA support they were seeing.

Statement 9: Flexibility is required to meet unique needs in different disasters. Our county's recovery depends on the ability to address private roads and bridges, but decisions are made only to have FEMA's guidance shift (i.e. recent letter on requirements). It is unclear how the funding for this will be managed and what requirements would be imposed on local government in the process.

Western North Carolina has many bridges and roads privately owned and maintained. Initially private roads/bridges were not going to be eligible for any FEMA assistance except through individual assistance means. After consideration of the need in our area, FEMA changed course and announced that funds could be used for repair of damaged private roads and bridges, but processes and requirements are not yet clear. A recent FEMA memo indicates these bridges and roads will be required to have an engineer's certification stating the bridge/road was built to the same or greater level than prior to the storm. No reliable records exist on many of these bridges and roads, however, meaning it is unreasonable to expect an engineer to be able to provide this certification universally. Lack of clarity about how funds will be administered, who will be responsible for holding bonds, guarantees or where liabilities will fall mean that repairs are being delayed further.

Statement 10: FEMA as floodplain protection ordinance enforcer and FEMA as disaster response created conflicting purposes that were logistical challenges to the county being effective at meeting the more immediate needs in the community. Disaster funding assistance should not be tied to having floodplain control ordinances and programs in place as it has historically. The incentive for having floodplain management programs should solely be eligibility for subsidized flood insurance through

NFIP in those communities. Early in the response, staff for the Flood Management and Insurance section put pressure on the county floodplain administrator to increase requirements on flood victims and institute unrealistic requirements for repair permits to be issued. Later in March, representatives from FEMA came to audit sample assessments conducted by the county floodplain administrator determining Substantial Damage or Non-Substantial Damage. Yet FEMA has still not resolved all housing placements for those who qualify for long term housing assistance from the disaster. The focus on compliance and the threat of loss of NFIP status, without consideration of immediate human needs, created contradictory priorities and additional pressure on the county.

Transylvania County administers a floodplain protection ordinance as required for the county to be eligible to receive funding and support from FEMA in a disaster. After the storm occurred, many of our residents were committed to staying at their property instead of using TSA that would take them out of the area. To restore their damaged homes to a livable condition, they were eager to make repairs. Initially, our building inspections department that administers the floodplain ordinance and our city planning department who also administers a floodplain ordinance were told by FEMA staff that they needed to require non-conforming structures to come into compliance before permitting any repairs. The steps to raise a home or flooded trailer include having a surveyor shoot base floor elevations and an engineer design the measures to safely raise the structure. There were no surveyors and engineers in the area available to even provide this kind of service, and the process would require time that the pending cold weather would not allow these families. Our staff witnessed families throwing away all their possessions and desperately trying to use dehumidifiers to make a safe place for their family to stay. I toured a flooded mobile home with a woman who was 9 months pregnant. Their outlets had been inundated, and there were volunteers eager to assist in repair; but our staff was told we might endanger our NFIP status if we did not require the floodplain compliance before issuing permits to make those repairs. Another elderly man was still living in his home even though mold had reached a foot high in the home, posing a health hazard to him while awaiting repairs.

Our staff found a document issued by FEMA indicating we had flexibility in the administration of repair permits and timeline of compliance with floodplain ordinances. We decided to use temporary occupancy permits to address the immediate need for healthy and safe shelter over forcing immediate floodplain compliance. FEMA staff from the floodplain administration side of the agency also put pressure on our building department to propose an increase in base floor elevation requirements in the ordinance, while the same department was in the middle of trying to address immediate assessment and building inspections needed to make homes livable for these families. The proposed FEMA changes would have increased the standard those impacted would have had to meet in the middle of the recovery.

An email included in this packet shows where a FEMA representative advised the city staff that the county was trying to skirt the ordinance because a county structure was being listed by the city as having flooded to 50% damage. This occurred despite both photographic evidence to the contrary and a sworn building inspector and a contractor providing written letters that the building did not have water above the basement of the structure. The push by these FEMA representatives on floodplain ordinance issues—and even implied threats of noncompliance and resulting ineligibility for future disaster funding—worked directly against the most urgent mission to restore safe shelter to affected families with winter weather pending. NFIP eligibility should be enough incentive for local governments to have floodplain administration ordinances, and assistance in a disaster should not be held hostage over

floodplain compliance. Forcing compliance should never take precedence over meeting immediate needs in a disaster. (Additional documentation attached in appendix.)

Conclusion: FEMA workers generally want to support communities in disasters and are genuine in their desire to help, as evidenced by their willingness to leave their own communities to come serve. Our experience has been that the issues in process, protocol, organizational structure, and ill-designed communication make those employees' efforts less effective and efficient in meeting the local community's needs. Improvements to the system and well thought out methods of creating flexibility to meet the unique needs of an impacted community will better serve those impacted in a disaster, as well as those who work within the FEMA system. Our county is thankful for the progress that has been made in response and recovery, but at the same time we recognize that more positive impact could be achieved in a more responsive and organized system. We appreciate the opportunity to share our experience and feedback.

Appendices:

Appendix A: Timeline of FEMA communication through 11-2-24 and sample communication challenges

Appendix B: Sample Documentation of Flood Management and Insurance Challenges

Appendix C: Sample Documentation Challenges Specific to Housing

Appendix D: Sample Documentation of Conflicting Public Assistance Rules from FEMA

Appendix E: Documented Example of Effective Handoff between FEMA Liaisons by Heather Long