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Hon. Chairman Sam Graves (MO)
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Hon. Chairman Scott Perry (PA)
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings,
and Emergency Management
United States House of Representatives

Dear Chairman Perry:

My name is Brian Trascher, and I am the National Vice President and Public Information Officer for the United Cajun Navy. We are a 501c3 Nonprofit disaster response and relief organization based in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and we have more than a dozen state chapters. As Hurricane Helene approached the coast of Florida's "big bend" on September 27th, 2024 I was actually inside of the National Response Coordination Center at FEMA headquarters in Washington DC. This was by invitation and had been scheduled a couple of months prior to the visit. Coincidentally, our meetings and tour of FEMA headquarters took place on the same day that the NRCC was put on a Level 1 activation due to the impending Hurricane Helene. We were invited to sit in the main conference room as FEMA leadership participated in video meetings with regional offices, appointed and elected officials who were all coordinating the National Response to what was expected to be a catastrophic weather event.

Our President and Founder, Todd Terrell, flew back to Baton Rouge that evening so that he could ensure that supplies were being loaded onto trucks from our warehouse and ready to preposition in Florida. I stayed behind in DC with our Executive Director Sara Galliano to finish out our meeting schedule she had arranged with the Red Cross and Pentagon, then I flew back to Louisiana on September 28th.

We had prepositioned supply trucks and SAR teams in the Florida Panhandle to more efficiently mobilize into affected areas when the weather conditions became safe. Prior to Helene making landfall, the United Cajun Navy's chief meteorologist Jeff George warned Todd and I of his concern about the forward speed of the storm. He explained that by moving so fast, the high intensity center would not degrade quickly enough before reaching inland to the mountainous areas of Eastern Tennessee, Eastern Georgia, and Western North Carolina. He suggested that the rainfall amounts could cause massive mudslides and catastrophic flooding in those communities who were not likely expecting this type of weather event.

After watching this prediction unfold, and getting reports from team members within our Georgia chapter, we quickly realized that the greatest need was going to actually be in these mountainous regions well north of the Florida Coast. On September 29th, we redirected approximately half of our fleet of supply trucks northward to Eastern Georgia. We also received reports that traditional interstate routes going into parts of Tennessee and North Carolina were potentially washed out and impassable by vehicles. Todd ordered me to fly to North Carolina to get a sitrep from the ground since communications were very spotty. I arrived in Hickory, North Carolina on October 1st and took a reconnaissance flight via helicopter into the mountains where I was able to survey the towns surrounding Asheville, North Carolina. When I made a fuel stop in Asheville, I did run into some FEMA executives who were already on the ground. They were

coordinating the arrival of more of their own associates as well as planning missions with the National Guard. We can testify to the fact that FEMA was on the ground early, however there are many reasons that will no doubt be investigated as to why the execution of the response was largely viewed by the public as delayed at best. Some of the meetings we had participated in at FEMA headquarters the week before had to do with FEMA's desire to work with NGOs such as the United Cajun Navy to coordinate first response as FEMA is not technically a first responder. There are many regulations and parts of the Stafford Act that will need to be examined so that these relationships can be solidified and better coordinated in the future. We hope that whoever leads FEMA in the next administration will continue these efforts to work with groups like ours.

During my initial aerial surveillance, I was immediately able to surmise that our traditional method of swift water rescue was not going to be the appropriate response for this mission. We put out a call to our network for fixed and rotary wing aircraft pilots to deploy to the region as soon as possible. One of the first chopper pilots to contact me was a volunteer named Ezra Rickards from Delaware, who flew his long range Bel helicopter all the way down to North Carolina at his own expense. Ezra performed over 80 rescue missions with his aircraft alone and was the first aircraft to make a supply drop for the United Cajun Navy in Black Mountain in those first days. Our Georgia chapter president, Shannon Ross, coordinated a fleet of approximately 45 private fixed wing aircraft out of an airport in Peachtree, Georgia where the United Cajun Navy had delivered supplies and provided fuel for these aircraft to fly into Western North Carolina airfields. We then expanded the role of our helicopter vendor, Total Flight Solutions, out of Davidson County North Carolina. TFS was able to reach beyond their own fleet and coordinate approximately 50 total rotary aircraft that flew non-stop missions of supplies into the mountains and evacuating people out of the mountains. This air operation went on from dusk till dawn for at least 7 days. In addition to the United Cajun Navy, other NGOs such as Operation AirDrop, Operation Helo, and Mercury One were coordinating air operations in much of the same manner for roughly the same period and beyond. Congressman Cory Mills of Florida personally participated in airlift and heavy lift rescue operations for several days or a week, he can confirm that precise duration.

It's hard to estimate how many pounds of supplies were brought in to the affected areas and how many people were evacuated out, but between the joint operations of United Cajun Navy and our partner NGOs it's safe to say that hundreds of thousands of pounds of emergency supplies and hundreds of the flood victims were evacuated out of those towns. Some of our partner agencies may have more accurate numbers in this regard.

Since it took a while for routes to open for our semi-trucks, part of my job became to identify regional airports that were open and could handle airdrop supplies as the Hickory airport was starting to exceed capacity. On October 4th I came upon the regional airport in Stanley County, North Carolina and I noticed there were a lot of National Guard troops in uniform at this location. It turns out that Stanley County is home to the 235th ATC Squadron and the 118th ASOS Squadron of the NC Air Guard. These are two air guard units whom one specializes in air traffic control and landing zones, while the other specializes and aerial surveillance and SAR. These are skills that were crucially necessary to the ongoing rescue ops in Western North Carolina. The reason why there wasn't much activity at that location was because neither squadron had been activated yet. Imagine my incredulity of learning this information after UCN and many other small nonprofits and volunteers had spent days risking life and limb to save strangers while these two native North Carolinian expert squadrons sat idle and frustrated by their lack of orders to go in and help. The 235th and 118th were eventually activated, but not until at least 6 days after Helene made landfall in North Carolina.

As we canvassed the affected areas in the mountain towns surrounding Asheville, the United Cajun Navy was able to make local contacts and partner on staging sites with landing zone capabilities. We first set up at Excel College in Black Mountain, where the Director and many of the students of that school volunteered sorting and making supply runs to victims in the community. Excel is still participating in relief operations to this day. We also coordinated with a gentleman named Adam Smith, a retired special forces soldier who was able to set up a supply drop and staging area with the landing zone at the Harley-Davidson dealership in Swannanoa.

The typical UCN deployment to a disaster area usually ranges from 7 to 14 days, because by that time the locals are up to speed and we're able to pass the baton to the long-term recovery groups. Since Western North Carolina has, in our opinion, been so badly neglected and the damage is so vast, we have made an exception and have joined the long-term recovery group and will participate for as long as we have the resources to support the mission. We've made many partnerships with local, national, and international nonprofits who are committed to the long-term recovery for Helene victims. UCN has secured warehouse space as well as land where we have been able to place camper and RV donations dedicated to housing displaced families. Winter has arrived in Western North Carolina and far too many of our fellow Americans are still sleeping in tents without electricity or potable water. We're doing everything within our power to help these people, but we can only operate within our means, and we can't help but wonder when the cavalry will finally arrive for them.

Many people ask us why we do what we do. The answer is simple, this happened to us, and we know the path forward. In 2005 Hurricane Katrina caused the levees surrounding New Orleans to fail and the city rapidly flooded forcing many unsuspecting residents out of their homes and neighborhoods, and unfortunately drowned an untold number of innocent people. The world watched as Good Samaritans came in their own boats at their own expense to rescue their fellow Louisianians from the floodwaters. Our Founder Todd Terrell was part of the original 68 vessels informally deputized by Lt. General Russell Honore, then Commander of Joint Task Force Katrina. And thus, the "Cajun Navy" was born. It's been 19 years, and the federal government still doesn't seem to understand the concept of a rapid response to a natural disaster. Again, we do this because it happened to us, and we don't want to see it happen again to any of our fellow Americans. The federal response in Western North Carolina has brought back many bad memories for us, but being able to respond quickly, save lives, and give hope to our new Appalachian friends has helped to heal some old wounds. But that doesn't change the fact that in the richest country on earth, we should have a better coordinated response between government agencies and experienced NGOs like the United Cajun Navy and others to make sure that the loss of life is minimal after the next major weather event. We like to say that we are the "First Shrimp Boots on the Ground, From Landfall to Light". Western North Carolina, Eastern Georgia, and Eastern Tennessee are still waiting for the light. We thank all members of Congress for their service and commitment to finding the answers we're all seeking. We stand ready to continue serving in our own capacities as well as field any questions Members may have. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Trascher', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Brian Trascher, VP & PIO
United Cajun Navy