

RALEIGH, N.C. / December 17, 2024 / In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, the North Carolina Association of County Directors of Social Services (NCACDSS) demonstrated the unwavering commitment of county Departments of Social Services (DSS) to meeting the needs of communities across the state.

The devastation caused by Helene was met with an equally powerful response by DSS agencies. From operating emergency shelters to administering Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (DSNAP), staff across North Carolina stepped up to deliver vital support during one of the worst disasters in the state's history.

County DSS agencies have always played a pivotal role in disaster response - providing safe havens through shelters, safeguarding children and adults in legal custody, and assisting families reliant on public assistance. This essential work was carried out while maintaining compliance with state-mandated performance standards for all other programs.

The impact of Hurricane Helene in Western North Carolina prompted both affected and non-affected counties to unite in providing critical aid. DSS staff from local county Departments of Social Services collectively staffed both local and state-operated shelters across the state, working over 5,000 hours to ensure displaced residents had access to safe and secure accommodations. Non-affected counties responded to the state's call for assistance by staffing state-operated shelters, highlighting the strong partnership between local agencies and state authorities.

County DSS staff in impacted areas processed more than 45,000 DSNAP applications over the course of the program, often working extended hours, including weekends. Non-affected counties contributed over 10,000 hours of support to assist with DSNAP operations both on-site and remotely, helping to process 25,000 of the more than 45,000 applications.

For the first time, the state introduced a dedicated DSNAP call center to handle the unprecedented need for assistance. County DSS employees collectively logged more than 8,000 hours staffing the call center, which extended operations seven days beyond DSNAP's official closure to address pre-registrations. Funding provided by the General Assembly enabled non-affected counties to assist remotely, alleviating local government concerns about staff expenses and ensuring vital support could be provided. Through close coordination with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NC DHHS), all pre-registrants were processed by the USDA's November 1 deadline, with over 20,000 pre-registrants finalized by October 25.

"Hurricane Helene tested our resilience and resolve," said NCACDSS Executive Director Sharnese Ransome. "The swift reaction and seamless coordination between local county Departments of Social Services and NCACDSS were critical in preventing delays and ensuring that essential services and assistance reached those affected by Hurricane Helene when they needed it most."

County DSS employees rose to the occasion during this challenging time and exemplified the strength and unity of North Carolina's county departments of social services. The support and leadership of Boards of County Commissioners were vital in enabling county staff to assist other counties, demonstrating the collaborative spirit that defines North Carolina.

ABOUT NCACDSS: The North Carolina Association of County Directors of Social Services is a non-profit association representing the social service directors across North Carolina's counties. The association's mission is to inform, educate, and empower its members in order to strengthen agencies, programs and the delivery of social services to families and individuals. Learn more at ncacdss.org.

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