



Date: October 5, 2024
To: North Carolina General Assembly Leadership
From: Common Cause North Carolina
North Carolina For the People Action
Democracy North Carolina
North Carolina Black Alliance
North Carolina Asian Americans Together

Re: Hurricane Helene Elections Policy Recommendations

There are serious concerns regarding Hurricane Helene’s impact on North Carolinians’ ability to vote successfully in the General Election. The destruction caused by Helene has significantly disrupted election administration and U.S. Postal Service operations in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) designated disaster area that covers 25 affected counties and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Tribal Area. It has displaced thousands of North Carolinians who remain unable to return to their homes and struggle to meet basic needs. Many of these voters may now require alternative means of voting or additional support to cast their ballot and have it counted.

Recognizing this, we respectfully recommend the following actions to ensure voting access and opportunity for all North Carolinians in light of the continuing effects of this devastating natural disaster.

Election Administration Funding

We recommend that the General Assembly provide robust yet flexible emergency funding to the State Board of Elections as well as to the 25 counties in the declared disaster area to cover emergency election-related expenses, such as any additional ballot printing, voter communications, supplies, and particularly staffing needs they have.

Providing CBOE staff, CBOE members, and election officials with hazard pay will reflect the severity of the current circumstances in which an election is being administered and help to ensure the stability of staffing. Elections-related disaster relief funding is essential to ensure every eligible voter who wants to cast a ballot can do so, which requires sufficient staffing to support voters.

Early Voting

We understand that the State and County Boards are currently evaluating access to the voting sites and resources in each county. If, as is anticipated, some early voting sites cannot be used, or there are continuing issues with safely accessing those locations or sufficiently staffing them, we recommend these policies to provide the CBOEs flexibility:

- a. Allow the County Boards to adjust early voting hours for some or all sites in that county as long as all voters in the county have an equal opportunity to cast a ballot.
- b. Allow the county boards to make changes to early voting plans based on site availability and, when possible, provide polling locations that are geographically located in the same precinct or close proximity so as to provide all voters in the county an equal opportunity to cast a ballot.

Vote-By-Mail

As voting by mail has already started, we recognize the challenges facing counties with vote-by-mail considering U.S.P.S. service closures and delays.¹ Several options could assist voters who either requested an absentee ballot prior to the Hurricane or are requesting to vote absentee because they were displaced or disabled by the Hurricane.

- a. Provide flexibility for voters to return mail-in ballots to any CBOE office in the state. If a voters' County Board of Elections office is not open, or if the voter is displaced temporarily, allow their ballot to be delivered by hand to *any* CBOE office. Similarly, allow mail-in ballots to be redirected to the State Board of Elections office in Raleigh for counties where the CBOE cannot receive mail.
- b. Reinstate a grace period of at least 5 days for mail-in ballots for all voters statewide due to the extensive statewide efforts to support Western NC, to minimize confusion and maximize clarity about the applicable deadlines, and to account for ongoing postal service delays and closures.
- c. Temporarily limit the witness requirements for absentee ballots to one witness or a notary in recognition of the substantial disruption of daily life caused by the natural disaster.

¹ "Postal Service Operational Updates in Western NC," North Carolina news (Oct. 2, 2024), U.S.P.S., <https://about.usps.com/newsroom/local-releases/nc/2024/1002-usps-operational-updates-in-western-nc.htm>.

- d. Allow affected counties flexibility to accept mail-in ballots that are damaged or have taped or unsealed envelopes.

MAT Teams

Authorize counties to deploy Multi-partisan Assistance Teams (MAT) to additional locations, such as where voters are temporarily dislocated (such as shelters and distribution centers), and assist voters in counties outside their area of residence, as needed. Provide additional funds to compensate MAT members to help with recruitment of additional MAT team members and address the severity of current conditions and the potential need to travel longer distances.

Election Day Voting

Similar to early voting concerns, selected Election Day polling precincts may be unable to be used due to their location and issues with safely accessing or staffing those locations.

- a. Allow counties to temporarily relocate precincts where necessary due to damaged or unsafe precinct facilities, lack of access, or staffing shortages. Prioritize precinct polling locations that are geographically located in the same precinct or close proximity.
- b. Allow counties to permit out-of-precinct voting on Election Day to facilitate access to voting at the CBOE office or designated transfer center.
- c. Allow the county board of elections to establish a “vote center,” such as the CBOE office, where any voter in the county can cast their ballot on Election Day, provided that vote centers are located so as to provide all voters in the county an equal opportunity to cast a ballot.

Voter Registration

With the voter registration deadline coming up on October 11th, we recommend extending the registration deadline.

- a. Extend the regular voter registration deadline to October 17 for all voters due to the statewide efforts to support Western NC and to minimize confusion.²
- b. Allow voter registration applications to be accepted at any CBOE office statewide or at the State Board of Elections office in Raleigh.

² South Carolina court extended the vote registration deadlines to October 14 for all forms of voter registration (in-person, online, and by mail), providing voters with up to 10 days extra depending on the form of registration. “Voter Registration Deadline Extended to October 14,” South Carolina Election Commission (Oct. 4, 2024), <https://scvotes.gov/voter-registration-deadline-extended-to-october-14/>.

Poll Workers

Provide flexibility for counties to fill possible poll worker shortages by allowing poll workers to serve outside their counties of residence. Provide poll workers and other precinct officials with hazard pay to compensate for the severity of current conditions and the potential need to travel longer distances.

Same-Day Registration

Provide a temporary exemption from meeting mail verification requirements prior to county canvass for same-day registration voters in counties within the disaster declaration due to known widespread disruption of mail and housing infrastructure. Specifically, temporarily lift the requirement that voters' ballots be discounted and their registration rejected if their mail is returned undeliverable prior to November 14, 2024.

Thank you for your consideration of these ideas to support all voters affected by Hurricane Helene.