

Inclusive Response and Recovery: FEMA's Disability Integration Efforts During Hurricane Helene

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FEMA Supporting Survivors with Disabilities Through Proactive and Inclusive Disaster Recovery Efforts

WASHINGTON -- FEMA's Disability Integration Advisors are on the ground in areas impacted by Helene to ensure recovery resources are accessible to all survivors. At FEMA, accessibility isn't confined to one program or specialist, it is incorporated into the execution of all our work and programs. The Disability Integration Advisors are experts in proactively addressing the disability community's equities and work alongside FEMA leadership to guide FEMA staff in incorporating these equities into their work. Having these advisors on the ground now is crucial to developing recovery systems that are planned and executed with survivors with disabilities in mind. Their duties include ensuring the distribution of water and food factors in survivors who cannot get to reach points and those who require assistive aids to file a FEMA application receive what they need to begin the recovery process.

At the direction of FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell, Director of FEMA's Office of Disability Integration Sherman Gillums plans to visit Helene-impacted areas to meet and collaborate with disability advocates and provide disability integration guidance to emergency managers.

"Disability, in some form or fashion, affects just about every family in our country and it is impossible to have a successful response without keeping accessibility at the forefront," said Director Sherman Gillums. "We're making sure people can access the information they need to make informed decisions in their recovery. Along with our state, local and voluntary partners, we're working to get people access to their care needs such as oxygen and prescription medications. Meeting these needs early prevents medical complications and helps preserve independence while reducing the likelihood of forced institutionalization or



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premature death.”

As part of FEMA's broader efforts to ensure all survivors have access to vital recovery information, specialized teams are actively addressing the needs of the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing communities. FEMA's Office of External Affairs' Certified Deaf Interpreter and communication access specialists are working with disability integration specialists, non-profit partners and state agencies, such as the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Emergency Preparedness team. Together, they are coordinating events to provide information on FEMA assistance, helping survivors complete the application for assistance and ensuring critical updates are communicated in accessible formats, including American Sign Language (ASL). This collaborative effort ensures that Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing survivors receive the support they need throughout the recovery process.

For those needing to apply for FEMA disaster assistance: You can [apply online](#) now or get help to apply using one of the methods below:

- Call the FEMA Helpline: 1-800-621-3362, 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. (in your time zone), 7 days a week.
Hours may be longer during high disaster activity. If you use a video relay service (VRS), captioned telephone (CTS), or other service, give FEMA your number for that service.
- [Find a Disaster Recovery Center \(DRC\) near you.](#)
DRCs are accessible and set up to provide help and answer questions after a disaster. The operating hours and services offered may vary at each DRC.
- Downloading and applying on the [FEMA App](#).

