

After Hurricane Helene, faith groups ramp up disaster relief

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(RNS)—Even before Hurricane Helene made landfall in the United States—near Tallahassee, Fla., on Sept. 26—faith-based disaster groups were on the move.

Disaster relief staff from the Southern Baptist Convention shipped food and other essentials to Valdosta, Ga., where Send Relief, a Southern Baptist humanitarian group, runs a ministry center. From there, supplies could be sent to the Gulf Coast and other areas affected by the devastating storm.

Coming ashore as a Category 4 hurricane, Helene killed more than 130 people at last count and left millions without power in at least eight states across the Southeast U.S., according to the Associated Press.

On Friday, as the storm headed north, SBC officials and leaders from other faith-based groups were holding conference calls and planning their relief efforts.

In the early days of their response, along with assessing damages, Southern Baptists and Salvation Army officials planned to establish mobile kitchens capable of turning out 10,000 meals a day in Georgia and Florida.

Two of the first mobile feeding sites will be based at Baptist churches in Live Oak, Fla., and Perry, Fla., both within an hour of Tallahassee.

“The Baptists set up their field kitchens, begin cooking, and then Salvation Army field units gather the meals and distribute them into the communities that were impacted,” Jeff Jellets, disaster relief coordinator in the Southeast for the Salvation Army, said in a telephone interview.

The Salvation Army also will set up shower units and other support services in communities affected by Helene. Other faith groups will send teams of relief workers with chainsaws to clean up debris and tools to help muck out flooded houses and will provide chaplains to support those affected by the storm.

Jellets said disaster relief teams may end up working in communities farther north along Helene's route as well, in Virginia and Tennessee, because of the extensive damage from the hurricane—which he called one of the worst storms he had seen in years.

Texas Baptists respond

Texans on Mission volunteers already have begun helping churches clean out flooded homes in the area around Tampa Bay, Fla.

A large group of Texans on Mission volunteers are on their way to Tennessee and North Carolina to help with flood recovery, chainsaw work and food service, as well as incident management.

They are supported by a shower and laundry unit, electrical repair teams, asset protection volunteers and chaplains.

The widespread effects of Helene will prove challenging for disaster relief groups. Normally volunteers and other staff come from nearby states. Helene was such a large system, however, that people are being mobilized as far away as the Midwest.

“This hurricane is more than 500 miles across and will impact as many as eight states within our territory,” Jellets said in an update on the Salvation Army's work.

“In my more than 20 years of disaster experience, I can't think of a time when such a large area was at risk and the Salvation Army could be called

to support so many people.”

Josh Benton, a vice president at Send Relief, said Southern Baptists have trained volunteers and leaders in each state and can draw from that pool of volunteers in states affected by the storm as well as other states.

“That coordination allows us to respond in multiple areas,” he said.

Though the Southern Baptist Convention is a relatively decentralized denomination, disaster relief is an instance where churches coordinate closely for the benefit of communities hit by disaster, Benton said.

Benton said Send Relief works closely with the Salvation Army and other faith groups, as well as with federal officials, FEMA and local officials. Jellets said faith groups already are coordinating their plans and will continue to do so in the days ahead.

On Friday, the ministry center in Valdosta already was serving meals to those affected by the storm, including a family with 10 children who lost their home in the storm, said Jay Watkins, a pastor who coordinates the ministry center.

More than half of the groups in the National Voluntary Organization Active in Disasters—a network of nonprofit disaster response agencies—are faith-based groups that remain an essential partner in the nation’s response to natural disasters.

“This is one of the darkest days in many people’s lives,” said Jellet.

“When the disaster hits them, there is an incredible amount of trust and responsibility involved. God opens the door for us to bring a little bit of light into those situations.”

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp.