

Hurricane Helene set to make landfall in Florida Panhandle

By Hubert Yates

MS Disaster Relief Director

Hurricane Helene is forecast to make landfall in the Big Bend area of the Florida Panhandle as a strong Category 3 or low Category 4 hurricane early this evening. This region has experienced several major storms in the past three years. Helene is expected to bring high winds, torrential rains, and storm surge flooding up to 20 feet near the point of landfall. Due to the hurricane's projected strength and speed, significant wind damage is anticipated well inland.

In Atlanta, forecasters predict sustained Category 1 hurricane winds, with gusts up to 90 mph. Heavy rains accompanying the storm may trigger landslides and flooding in the mountainous regions of Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. The effects of this storm could impact the Georgia-Florida region for four to six weeks or longer.

Disaster Response Plans Activated

Preliminary deployment plans have been developed by Florida Baptist Disaster Relief (FLBDR) and Georgia Baptist Disaster Relief (GABDR). These plans are subject to the initial assessments, which will be conducted after the storm passes. A mobilization of the Southern Baptist Convention Disaster Relief (SBC DR) network is expected in the coming days due to the hurricane's strength and scope.

Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief (MSBDR) volunteers are on standby, prepared to assist any affected states. MSBDR is coordinating closely with leadership from its Region 4C SBC DR partners – Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi – to ensure an effective response. MSBDR may be

asked to supply volunteers and teams for chainsaw operations, tarping, flood recovery, and mass feeding in the coming weeks. MSBDR deployments may begin as early as Sept. 29, 2024.

How You Can Help

MSBDR is requesting assistance from churches in two key areas:

- 1. Financial Donations:** Financial contributions to reputable, active disaster relief organizations are the most effective way to support relief efforts. This allows responding organizations to meet immediate needs and procure specific resources that can be transported, handled, and distributed efficiently.

Material collections or supply drives, while well-intentioned, are often inefficient and complicated. Items collected are frequently mismatched with actual needs, and donations may be difficult to transport and distribute. Collection drives can also delay delivery, and donated items, such as food, water, and diapers, may expire before they can be used. Please **do not conduct material or supply drives**; instead, encourage financial donations.

- 2. Designated Donations:** Financial contributions to the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB) tagged with "Disaster Relief" or specific disaster designations (e.g., Hurricane Helene Relief) are dedicated to supporting those areas. Gifts designated for a particular disaster are used solely for operations and activities related to that event. If funds exceed the response costs, they will be used for recovery efforts through local associations and churches. For out-of-state incidents, excess funds will be distributed to the affected state's convention for use by local associations and churches.

Credentialed Volunteers

Credentialed volunteers are essential in disaster response, providing trained and vetted individuals who have established trust with survivors, communities, and local authorities. MSBDR and SBC DR volunteers are all members of Southern Baptist congregations and undergo a credentialing process, including basic training in disaster relief and specialized training in areas such as chainsaw operations, tarping, mass feeding, chaplaincy, and incident management. Volunteers are also subject to background checks to ensure the safety and integrity of the relief efforts.

The strength of MSBDR and SBC DR lies in their preparedness and organization. Teams arrive equipped and ready to perform essential tasks, earning recognition from agencies such as FEMA and MEMA as trustworthy and reliable partners in disaster response.

Spontaneous Volunteers

While spontaneous volunteers often have good intentions, they may lack the training and equipment necessary to safely and effectively assist in disaster situations. Unprepared volunteers can inadvertently create additional risks and may require resources that are already in short supply. Credentialed volunteer groups like MSBDR and SBC DR are trained and equipped to provide organized, intentional ministry and support in disaster operations.

Call to Prayer

Please pray for those affected by Hurricane Helene, the leaders planning the response, and the volunteers deploying to bring help, hope, and healing in Jesus' name.