

Testimony of Karen Brinson Bell

U.S. House Subcommittee on Elections Hearing

“Maintaining Election Operations in the Face of Natural Disasters”

September 16, 2025

Thank you, Chairwoman Lee, Ranking Member Sewell, and Members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to share the extraordinary work of election professionals and our partners to ensure that safe and secure voting continued in western North Carolina following the devastation of Hurricane Helene in the fall of 2024.

My name is Karen Brinson Bell, and from June 1, 2019 until May 14, 2025, I had the honor of serving as North Carolina’s chief election official and the executive director of the State Board of Elections, overseeing the voting process for more than 7.5 million registered voters and leading the 100 county boards of elections through hurricanes, a global pandemic, and record-setting turnout. Since 2006, I have served in various roles at the county, state, and national levels within the elections profession. Most of my elections career has been in the mountains of western North Carolina, first as field support for the 12 western-most counties and next as Transylvania County’s director. While born and raised in eastern North Carolina, more of my life has been in western North Carolina than anywhere else. When Helene struck, it was personal because I know those affected, I know the rivers and ridgelines. And I also know firsthand the tenacity, resiliency, and absolute grit of the people.

Helene and previous disasters show the critical need for strong communication early and often among federal, state, and local partners, as well as steady, reliable funding and advance preparation. Our voters must have confidence that they will be able to cast a ballot and have that ballot count through any emergency situation. We do that by talking early and often, planning carefully, and ensuring all election offices have the resources they need well in advance.

Ahead of the 2024 election, North Carolina was identified as a swing state. As such, we knew the spotlight would be on us and that we could not start planning early enough. There’s a buildout that begins years in advance to prepare for any situation. From tabletop exercises at the state and local level with emergency

management and other partners to continuing our twice per month Huddles (statewide virtual trainings with the counties), our state conferences, our HUBS collaborative approach to work, and our Monday Morning Kickoffs (standups five weeks before a large election), we trained for the moment, we exercised for the moment, and we planned for the moment throughout my six-year tenure as state director.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Responding to a disaster or emergency does not simply happen in the moment. Dotting the Is and crossing the Ts in advance ensured that we were well positioned when Helene moved into western North Carolina on Thursday, September 26, 2024, and unleashed her devastation on Friday, September 27, 2024, dumping 30 inches of rain in Yancey County in just three days and pushing water down the French Board River at more than 240,000 gallons per second.

In a year when we thought our biggest challenge might be AI, having an “all hazards” approach meant we prepared for the unknown and pivoted when disaster struck. With this planning and preparation in place, I was able to consistently reiterate, “We don’t stop an election; we figure out how to proceed.” Having guided the state through elections during Hurricane Dorian and the global pandemic, we already knew that it's not a matter of if there will be a disruption of an election, it’s a matter of when it will occur, how it will occur, and how we respond.

HURRICANE HELENE

The week that Helene struck, we had just started sending out absentee-by-mail ballots, which had been delayed because of a candidate withdrawal dispute. On Monday, September 30th, 14 county election offices were unable to open as scheduled, and we had limited ability to communicate with local election officials and their staff. In some cases that week, we did not know if the elections staff were okay or not. Cell phone towers were down. There was no power and no internet. Since analog phone lines are mostly obsolete and email requires working computers or smart phones, communication from county to county or across the state was difficult and even non-existent in some circumstances.

In the first 24 hours, the State Emergency Management Director and I were on the phone. He made it clear that State Emergency Management (NCEM), in the midst of their rescue efforts and standing up essential services, understood that elections were underway and would be supported just like other critical infrastructure. He had already taken steps to designate elections as a priority because of the proximity of in-person early voting starting in less than 20 days, their understanding that absentee ballots still had to go out and be received, and that voter registration was at its peak. Over the first few days, NCEM provided resources to ensure voting could continue, and we conveyed this to North Carolinians as early as the second business day after the storm passed – the election would happen and voters would be able to vote. Through NCEM, FEMA, and the state's emergency fund, we were immediately provided with the financial, personnel, and logistical resources that we did not have in our operating budget. This fulfillment was so seamless, I even conveyed this to the legislative staff when asked in the first few days what resources were needed. As a relief package was put together in October, we requested approximately \$2.5 million, and the legislature authorized \$5 million. Because so much was supported through NCEM and FEMA, we only needed approximately \$500,000 of the legislative funding to ensure those impacted by the hurricane could vote safely and securely.

Emergency funding and resources are critical in these times of crisis. The day-to-day operating budget of the State Board of Elections could not absorb the costs of responding to Helene. NCEM and FEMA did that – delivering portable toilets, blank-slate tents, ATVs and personnel to cross rivers, satellite communication devices, gas, generators, battery backups, and more – with the only instruction being keep the receipts and setting a deadline for requests. Some of these services were delivered within the first few days. While our legislature worked as expeditiously as a governing body could, those relief funds were not in place until after the bill was enacted on October 10, 2024, just seven days before the start of early voting, which is the most used voting method by North Carolinians. NCEM and FEMA were able to immediately meet critical needs and fill the urgent resource gaps.

RESULT OF PROPER PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Within one week of the wrath of Helene, all county offices were operational – no equipment damage, no ballots ruined, and most importantly no election worker lives lost. By the start of early voting on October 17th, 76 of the planned 80 voting sites in the 25-county disaster declared region opened with power and sufficient workers. These counties represent 1/4 of the counties in our state and approximately 1.3 million registered voters. The region includes one of the larger counties in our state and some of the smallest. They reflect economically thriving and struggling communities. And they are red, blue, purple, and every political ideology in between.

By Election Day, a temporary road or alternate route was in place to reach every isolated community. Very few polling places were consolidated – we took voting to the people. Only 7 tents were needed as replacement voting sites. We delivered options for voting, and the voters showed up. Western North Carolina outpaced the rest of the state by 2 percentage points in turnout.

This herculean effort would not have been possible without our partners and advanced planning. The State Board also had emergency authority, which they exercised, and later these provisions became part of the legislature's relief act. These measures, which we developed in consultation with the affected counties, included:

- Authorization for county boards of elections by bipartisan majority vote to modify their early voting plans and Election Day precinct voting sites.
- Ability for the county boards of elections by bipartisan majority vote to appoint election officials for early voting and Election Day sites registered outside of the precinct, from other counties, and change assignments from previous designations.
- Allowing absentee-by-mail voters or their near relatives to deliver the completed ballot to any county in the state or to the State Board of Elections, and other provisions giving flexibility for voting absentee at the county office and returning ballots to Election Day voting sites.
- Assistance by multi-partisan assistance teams at disaster shelters and relief facilities.

Because the State Board of Elections had emergency authorization, we were able to take immediate action and give the counties the leeway to get the job done and the voters the flexibility needed to exercise their right to vote. This is a key takeaway that other states should consider as they navigate how to respond to disruptions to elections. Also of note, the 2024 General Election was the largest election with Voter ID in use in our state. No action was needed on this matter, as state law allows an exception form in lieu of an acceptable form of ID. Natural disaster is an acceptable exception. If other states with Voter ID do not have such a provision in law, then an amendment to the law or emergency authority are recommended.

Other lessons learned from this experience include:

- **Build, exercise, and maintain working relationships:** Relationships with emergency management and other partners like IT services, National Guard, and federal partners like CISA, EAC, USPS, and FBI were critical to stand up our election operations in an emergency.
- **Integrate with these partners:** With each election, large or small, the State Board staff and two members of the State Board were activated on Election Day with these partners at the North Carolina Emergency Operations Center. Many counties have adopted a similar practice either on-site or through a Web-EOC. We also met monthly and had dedicated working groups as needed. They learned our language, and we learned theirs.
- **Have continuous engagement with vendors:** Had there been damage to equipment or ballots, established communication would have been critical to prepare new equipment or prepare new ballots in time. Fortunately, we did not face this, but our working relationship with our vendors meant one even provided more than 1,800 meals on Election Day to workers in the affected counties recognizing that power and usable water were still issues in many areas.
- **Know old school, manual methods and how to shift to them:** Election officials must anticipate worst case scenarios like loss of power, cell service, and internet. Backup processes like printed rosters with contact information for poll workers and hand-held radios can be quick solutions to continue normal operations.

- **Communication is key – internally and externally:** Keep staff, Board members, other counties, and engaged partners informed through stand-up meetings and daily reports via email. Routine updates also reduced meetings allowing those in direct response to do the work that needed to be done, while those on standby were kept apprised. Also, communicate with the public through press releases and press availability. With limited power and internet access early on, local radio and information posted at disaster relief centers, though rather rudimentary, became crucial to let people know that voting would take place.
- **Prepare in advance for all hazards:** In today's environment, it's not a matter of if there will be a disruption in voting, rather when and how. Our response to Helene was years in the making and built on lessons learned by delivering voting during the pandemic. Develop continuity of operation and crisis communication plans and put them into action not just on a shelf or computer file. We also deployed our Attack Response Kits (ARKs), which were originally assembled to set up a temporary elections office because of a cybersecurity attack, but these kits provided replacements or additional laptops and secure connectivity before service was restored in several of our counties. An all-hazards approach has long been used by emergency management and law enforcement. Adoption of this strategy has furthered our partnerships and improved our election readiness.
- **Funding needs to be appropriated for emergency communication:** Our legislature was able to act quickly, but we also benefited from a Voter ID education campaign that was already underway and were able to expand the contract with the advertising firm rather than having to go out to bid. Paid communication was needed in the affected region and across the state including print, radio, flyers, mobile billboards, and social media to inform voters, and their friends and family, with the simple message, "You can still vote" with a QR code and website directing them to the details of the provisions put in place to ensure they could vote and that their vote would count.
- **Finally, be human:** Much like the instruction on an airplane to place your oxygen mask on first before helping others, we had to remember that county staff lost their homes and belongings, poll workers were displaced, and more than 100 lives were lost and hundreds of others needed rescue.

To stand up the election meant we first had to stand up personal situations in many incidents. We also had to consider how best to reach people and make things as simple as possible at a difficult time, like collocating voting sites with disaster relief centers. We found that ensuring the voters could cast their ballot gave them a voice when many thought they were not being heard and often they said voting “restored a sense of normalcy” otherwise lost in all the devastation.

September is National Preparedness Month. We are also approaching the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Helene. We delivered voting in North Carolina because of advanced preparation, strong communication, and intentional partnership with federal, state, and local emergency management and other support structures, who provided funding and resources in an emergency. However, we cannot let our guard down or become complacent, as natural disasters will continue to occur and likely at the time of elections given our nation’s election schedule. We cannot retract resources or funding, rather more needs to be dedicated to the effort to ensure voting continues and ballots are counted no matter the circumstance.

Thank you for inviting me to testify, and I look forward to answering your questions.