

## **Student-Led Advisory: FEMA and The Massive Flooding in North Carolina**

Following Hurricane Helene, North Carolina faced catastrophic devastation. The tropical cyclone killed more than 230 people, with about half of all deaths occurring in North Carolina, and had an economic impact of as high as \$200 billion (Rafferty, 2025). Your organization sent resources and personnel to North Carolina to assist in recovery after the storm. However, you faced severe criticism from the public due to mismanagement of the situation. You did not provide early advisories, delayed water delivery, and could not clarify where 400 pallets of food and water had been shipped within the state (FEMA and North Carolina Flooding, n.d.). It was perceived that you failed to meet the urgent needs of those affected by the Category 4 Hurricane and were ultimately disorganized in your efforts. The public lost trust in FEMA's ability to support those affected by disasters.

Past emergency responses that have been more successful can be analyzed to better understand how your organization fell short in this situation. For example, your response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012 was considered effective. Within the first two weeks after the storm, you distributed millions of liters of water and meals, along with blankets, cots, tarps, generators, and medical kits, efficiently and in large quantities (FEMA, 2022). Hurricane Sandy proved FEMA's ability to respond to devastating storms, yet you still had shortcomings during Hurricane Helene.

Another failure in handling Hurricane Helene relief was your decision to station teams at central neighborhood locations rather than sending assistance teams door-to-door as you had done in past situations (St.John, 2025). While this decision was addressed in a news release, it was perceived as you being less available to help those in immediate need. But, as rumors incorrectly spread online, FEMA's reputation was damaged when it circulated that you had

completely pulled out of hurricane-affected areas of North Carolina due to threats made against staff members. Tensions continued to escalate when a FEMA worker was fired for telling her team to avoid homes with pro-Trump signs (St. John, 2025). A congressional investigation into your response in North Carolina is now likely, which could result in cuts to your budget.

Several key issues emerged from your response to the North Carolina flooding. First was the agency's communication failure, which left many residents unprepared for the storm. Without putting out advisories in advance to warn people, you failed to uphold your mission of helping people before, during and after disasters (FEMA, 2025).

Second, your organization had logistical mismanagement. Poor execution in tracking essential resources, such as food and water, delayed aid to those in need, causing public frustration and a lack of trust in your abilities (St. John, 2025). Your failure to clarify where food and water were shipped in North Carolina contrasts with your response to Hurricane Sandy, where aid was quickly delivered and well-documented.

Third, your decision to shift from sending disaster survivor assistance teams into neighborhoods to knocking on doors to stationing teams at neighborhood locations was perceived as distancing the agency from the communities it was meant to serve (St. John, 2025). Ineffective communication behind the decision-making allowed for misinformation to spread about your agency, including the viral rumor that FEMA had completely pulled out of North Carolina.

Finally, the situation was further escalated when a worker in your organization advised her team to avoid homes displaying pro-Trump yard signs (St. John 2025). The individual was fired, but this has still led to a potential congressional investigation into your agency that could lead to budget cuts if lawmakers determine you denied aid to Trump supporters and acted with political bias.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, several groups play critical roles, each facing unique challenges and priorities. When looking at FEMA's crisis response, it is important to discuss the involved parties that play a key role in this situation and the competing values and goals of each group. Your primary goal at FEMA is clear: rapidly deliver disaster relief and support recovery efforts in North Carolina. However, you quickly encountered difficulties balancing efficiency with accessibility. Your decision to shift from door-to-door outreach to stationary teams in fixed neighborhood spots inadvertently sparks backlash. Residents, already overwhelmed, view this approach as distant and inaccessible, especially when immediate, visible support is urgently needed.

North Carolina residents form another crucial group. Their priority is straightforward—quickly receiving essential supplies like food, water, and health assistance. However, their frustration grows as your agency struggles with transparency. Residents demand clear communication, notably when confusion arises regarding the location and distribution of 400 pallets of food and water. This lack of proactive, timely updates amplifies existing mistrust. Additionally, controversies such as your dismissal of a FEMA employee who allegedly redirected aid away from pro-Trump households further deepen community skepticism and perceptions of political bias.

Your frontline workers and operational managers face internal conflicts as well. Tasked with effectively executing disaster response plans, they juggle operational efficiency with personal and team safety. Their internal decisions, while justified operationally, often clash with residents' expectations of immediate and visible aid. This disconnect significantly contributes to negative perceptions, with some residents accusing your agency of bias or indifference.

Congress adds another layer of complexity through oversight. Lawmakers scrutinize your response, pursuing accountability to inform future improvements and funding decisions. However, this oversight risks becoming politicized, particularly amid sensitive allegations of political bias. Congressional investigations, while essential for accountability, have the potential to inadvertently politicize disaster response, possibly impacting your future capabilities and resources.

Finally, the media significantly shapes the narrative around your efforts. Their aim—to inform the public and hold you accountable—occasionally collides with a desire for sensational headlines. For example, a viral yet unfounded rumor suggesting you withdrew aid due to threats significantly undermines public trust and complicates your communication efforts. While highlighting genuine concerns, the media's focus sometimes exaggerates problems, fueling mistrust and obscuring the substantial efforts your teams are making on the ground.

First, your organization should consider using apologia, a strategy that is an effort to defend your reputation. The form of apologia we recommend is conciliation. Conciliation could be represented in a public apology. Taking accountability for both the accidental and deliberate mistakes made by those representing your organization would be the first step to rebuilding a positive image. This apology would include a restatement of the organization's mission. Proclaiming a devotion to your organization's mission and admitting guilt for the distress your organization caused the residents of North Carolina could be a start for repairing your reputation and public trust. We suggest this apology denounces the actions of the workers who were stationed in North Carolina, as times of life and death leave no time for politically charged aggression. It should also be restated that the worker who declined to help those with pro-Trump signs in their yard was terminated. We suggest you also share factual information as to why

necessary resources like food and water were not brought before the foreseen storm. This apology should be available for public view in the form of a news release, social media post, and fact sheet on your webpage. Additionally, sending staff an overview of the situation, and showing genuine care for employees and an intent for internal repair could help bring clarity to the situation and where the organization stands. This would ensure North Carolina residents, frontline workers, Congress, and the media receive the apology and your organization can begin to rebuild its relationships.

Our second suggestion for your organization is to implement a retraining initiative for all front-line workers, and to sponsor a fundraiser for residents suffering from the effects of the flood. These options are focused around rebuilding your image in the public eye. This retraining initiative will focus on orienting team advisors and employees on ethical and proactive service beginning, during, and after natural disasters. This effort will demonstrate your organization's prioritization of ethics, equality, and proper education. It should be emphasized that “natural disasters become catalysts of political instability” during times of stress political bias may be more prevalent (Omelicheva, 2011). Team advisors should be aware that bias could occur at any time and plan for ways to handle this scenario in the future. To rebuild public trust and make reparations for the damage caused, your organization should consider helping the community rebuild through a fundraiser sponsored by your organization. The funds raised would directly help impacted individuals, families, those with damaged homes, and displaced persons. This could help rebuild your image in the public eye, showing your care for those who struggled during the disaster. The fundraiser would assist those who have been directly affected recover from the disaster of the floods and receive resources after FEMA's mistakes.

This circumstance displayed instances of organization's poor communication efforts by failing to provide details of the ongoing disaster and the lack of solutions to technical struggles. Your organization struggled to provide alternative forms of communication with residents as power lines were down and teams stopped going door to door to protect residents. These three instances prohibited your organization from aligning with its missions and values of your organization. Our third suggestion is to ensure a more concrete communication network in preparation of natural disasters and developing preventative measures for future scenarios. We suggest your organization creates a communication plan for future disaster outreach. This communication plan will include alternative ways to communicate with the public, such as providing walkie talkies to residents and teams, prior to a predicted disaster. Providing this plan to employees and the public would be a proactive way of ensuring stable communication and show that your organization is focused on learning from their mistakes. Providing FEMA workers and residents with alternative ways to communicate when power is down would alleviate anxiety if workers are unable to go door to door to help those affected. Residents should know if help is on the way, or delayed. Planning ahead would stop a similar incident from occurring.

FEMA's response to the flooding in North Carolina after Hurricane Helene caused an uproar on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter (X). In turn, your company can track the sentiments on these platforms after your apology goes public. You should monitor the number of interactions, such as views, comments, likes and shares, as well as the nature of these interactions. Due to the severity of this crisis, people expect a lot from your company. With the devotion to FEMA's original mission being emphasized in your apology, as well as the transparency of denouncing both intentional and unintentional mistakes that should

never be made in such a dire situation, you should expect some appreciative responses from the receiving end of this apology via social media.

For your second potential approach, you would evaluate its success via media monitoring. After you announce the start of your retraining efforts and kick off your fundraising campaign, you should closely monitor the reaction from media outlets. These outlets include, but are not limited to: CNN, Fox, MSNBC and ABC. You would want to closely monitor the tone of the headlines in which they're discussing the training initiatives and ensure that it's being portrayed as positive news, but even more so, the response to your fundraiser. You want news outlets to enthusiastically track the progress of the money raised with your fundraising efforts, as well as the progression of the repairs done in North Carolina with the money.

Finally, for your third approach we would suggest tracking its impact and effectiveness through surveys. These surveys should go out after a disaster response has taken place, and should be presented as completely optional. Ideally, the survey will reach affected residents and volunteers/employees that were on site of the area affected by the disaster. Within the survey, you should allow constructive feedback so that people know and understand you are doing everything in your power to improve your impact on the community in times of need.

Now that would lead us to our final recommendations for you and the best path forward, and more importantly, why we think these are the best options that are on the table.

To begin with, FEMA must start by stepping up and issuing a public apology. And this can't just be a simple apology or one that's a corporate way of handling it. This apology must come from the heart; it needs to be real, and direct acknowledgement of the mistakes that were made must be absolutely addressed due to the Hurricane. Addressing how communication wasn't early, how vital resources were lost, and how the employees' situation made it seem like you

were biased despite taking disciplinary action must be as clear and precise as possible.

Additionally, we believe that you must remind the public of your purpose: to help before, during and after disasters. By doing this, it reaffirms your mission, shows you can take proper accountability and fixes the rumor that you pulled out of the state due to threats and remarks.

Our second recommendation is to implement a well-made retraining program for all frontline staff and team leaders. This program must cover clear ethical conduct in politically sensitive environments and areas, reinforce and restructure your neutrality, and establish proactive, on-the-ground, hands-on communication during a disaster or crisis. The problem with this situation isn't just what happened logistically; it also involves how FEMA's presence was extremely lacking, and the victims of the disaster felt this. Therefore, this retrained program shows not only FEMA's apology, but it also shows you're changing for a better purpose to prove that you're there for the people, and you prevent a fallout like this from happening in the future. In short, you should apologize to the public and acknowledge the harm that has been done, additionally, you should then retrain internally to prevent this from ever happening again.

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