



March 28th, 2025

Today marks Day 2 of our 'Heroes of Helene' series, and we're excited to share the story behind the Emergency Shelter at the Health Department. Stay tuned for more incredible stories in the coming days.

Emergency Shelter Team: Cleveland County Health Department, DSS, and More

When Hurricane Helene caused unexpected damage in our rural community, we found ourselves without electricity and facing an urgent need to support oxygen-dependent citizens at risk of losing power. With limited resources and no prior preparation, we quickly converted the Health Department into an emergency shelter.

Our team, which included nurses, social workers, clerical staff, emergency responders, IT professionals, electronic maintenance workers, and general maintenance personnel, rallied together under pressure. Our top priority was securing a power supply for oxygen concentrators to ensure those who depended on them had access to life-saving air.

"I was relieved that those who needed help the most received it. My family was without power for a week, and it was stressful just managing everyday needs—yet we didn't have medical conditions requiring equipment," said Karen Vaughn, a Public Health Nurse. "I can't imagine the fear I would have felt if I had depended on power to stay alive during that time. I was honored to help and proud that my employer played a key role in caring for Cleveland County residents when they needed it most."

To improvise, we used alternative generator-powered outlets in clinical spaces and converted traditional exam rooms into patient rooms. Despite limited power, the team adapted, with EMS providing portable oxygen as needed to relocate patients throughout the facility. Nurses worked tirelessly to monitor residents, adjusting to their needs while managing the surge of requests from the hospital.

Although communication was limited, the team's resourcefulness and collective focus kept the shelter operating smoothly, ensuring oxygen-dependent citizens remained safe despite the chaos. In the face of this unexpected disaster, the resilience of our community and the dedication of our team made all the difference in protecting our most vulnerable.

"It was incredible how quickly our team set up the shelter to assist residents with medical needs who couldn't stay in their homes without power. There was a celebration every time a patient was able to return to their home!" said Sheila Ciliberti, an Operations Analyst.

A heartfelt thank you to Tiffany Hansen for sharing this story. We are truly grateful to the entire Shelter Team for their exceptional efforts in making this operation a success.