

SHSMD26 CONNECTIONS

Health Care Marketing, Strategy & Communications

American Hospital Association Conference
September 27-29 ∙ Baltimore

Resilience in Real Time: Navigating Crisis Communications During Hurricane Helene

Molly Luton, Chief Strategic Communications Officer
Ballad Health



Learning Objectives

- **Apply** real-time crisis communication strategies.
- **Support** executives, teams and personal resilience during sustained crises.
- **Build** scalable community communication frameworks for response and recovery.







Hurricane Helene in the Appalachian Highlands

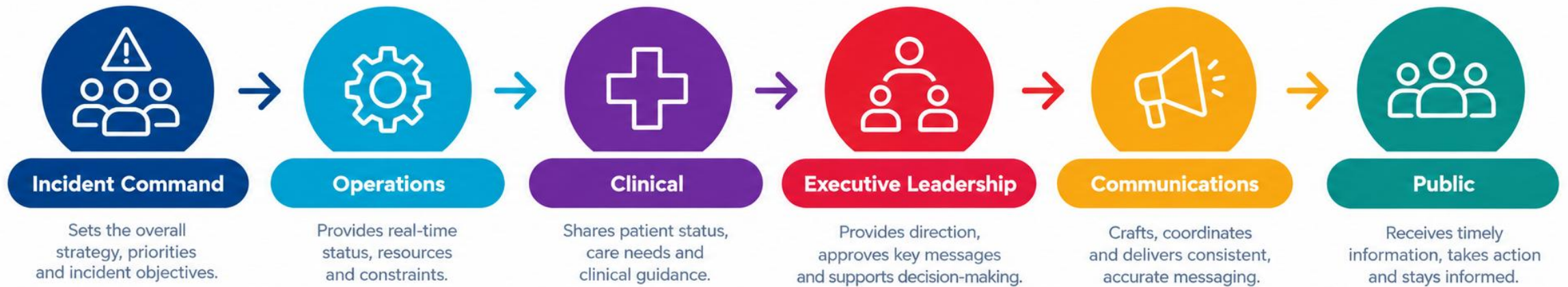
- On September 27, 2024, Hurricane Helene brought **unprecedented flooding** to the Ballad Health service area, severely impacting many rural communities in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia.
- The flooding caused **extensive damage to infrastructure and homes**, prompting immediate concerns for the safety of patients, team members, and first responders.
- The Nolichucky River, which runs through Greene and Unicoi Counties in Tenn., ran at more than 1.4 million gallons per second, **twice the speed of Niagara Falls**.

You have 15 minutes to get your organization's first message out.

What do you need to know?

The First Rule: Get Close to the Truth

- The communicator's job isn't to have all the answers.
- It's to establish the most reliable source of truth available.



Static crisis plans fail in dynamic crises.

- Flooding begins
- Roads close
- Facilities become isolated
- Rescue operations begin
- Unicoi County Hospital becomes inaccessible
- Evacuations become necessary
- [National] Media attention escalates

The Impact

Emergency Situation: Seventy individuals stranded on the hospital's roof and in nearby swift-water rescue boats due to rising flood waters.



Communications Command Center

■ Information in

- People on the roof...
- Incident Command
- Hospitals
- EMS
- Executives
- Public agencies
- Team members
- Media Social channels

■ Information out

- Team members
- Patients/families
- Executives
- Government
- Community
- Social/digital
- Media



Urgent Safety Reminders



All Clear

Ballad Health

Systems Affected	• Phone systems
Facilities Affected	• All facilities
Scheduled Impact Dates/Times	• 9/28 9:00 AM – 9/29 8:00 PM
Description	• Inbound and outbound calling is now working
Duration	• 35 hours
Action Required	• None
Contact Information	• If you have additional questions regarding this Service Update, please contact the Service Desk at 423-431-6290
Additional Information	



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Strategy & Market
Development™

Communications Command Center Tips

- Documentation
- Sit beside the CEO, Incident Commander or the source of information
- Clear roles
- Approval pathways
- Message discipline
- Version control
- Take notes with timestamps
- Text on an iPad
- Battery packs, backpacks
- Satellite phones, Starlink
- “PR Uniform” – branded gear, comfortable shoes, hair tie, hats
- Everything you write will be discoverable
- Have best-case and *worst-case* drafts in the hopper
- Translation services



- At 9:38 am on Friday, September 27, Ballard Health received notice from the Unicoi County Emergency Management Agency of a need to evacuate Unicoi County Hospital due to unusually high and rising water from the Nolichucky River. Ballard Health's Chief Medical Officer for the region was immediately on scene to supervise the evacuation, and the evacuation of 11 patients commenced. Unicoi County leaders deployed ambulances; however, the flooding of the property happened so quickly the ambulances could not safely approach the hospital.

- Ballard Health Chairman Alan Levine spoke directly with Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) Director Patrick Sheehan at 10:20 am, and TEMA immediately worked with local emergency management agencies to deploy boats to help evacuate the hospital. Unfortunately, the water around the hospital, which had also begun intruding inside the hospital, became extremely dangerous and impassable, and prevented the boats from safely being able to evacuate the hospital. Due to high winds, no helicopters could safely fly in an effort to help evacuate the hospital.

- As of 12:27 pm, 54 people have been relocated to the roof of the building and seven remain in rescue boats. The hospital has been engulfed by extremely dangerous and rapidly moving water. The situation at the hospital is very dangerous and TEMA and National Guard resources are engaged in what can only be described as a dangerous rescue operation.

- We ask everyone to please pray for the people at Unicoi County Hospital, the first responders on-scene, the military leaders who are actively working to help, and our state leaders. Ballard Health appreciates the support and effort of Mayors Garland Evely, Patty Woodby and Joe Grandy, each of whom has offered assistance and have maintained ongoing contact with Ballard Health leadership.

Your CEO Is Now a Crisis Communicator

- Keep leaders informed without overwhelming them
- Translate operational reality into public-facing language
- Prepare talking points rapidly
- Protect leaders from unnecessary distractions
- Know when not to put a leader in front of a camera

Leadership visibility is an operational tool.

- Accompany leaders into impacted areas
- Think about their safety and mental health
- Appropriate branded attire
- Capture usable content in real time

Don't just prepare the executive for the interview.

Prepare the executive for the moment.







Be Prepared to Brief the Governor

What do they need to know in 60 seconds?

- What we know
- What we don't know
- What we're doing
- What we need
- What's next







FOX

WEATHER

RESCUES MADE AFTER PATIENTS STRANDED IN HOSPITAL

HURRICANE HQ

8:47P MT

© ISAAC

CAT 1



WIND

90 MPH

MOVEMENT

ENE @ 16 MPH



FOX

RAPID WATERS PREVENT BOATS FROM REACHING HOSPITAL

Your Communications Team Is Also in the Disaster

- Think about their safety and mental health
- Mandatory time off
- Use proper briefing protocols at shift change
- Feed them
- Dress down or distribute swag to make them comfortable
- Don't forget about *life*
- Debrief and learn

The Communicator Behind the Communicator

- Managing your own adrenaline
- Separating urgency from importance
- Knowing when to step away
- Maintaining perspective
- Making decisions with incomplete information
- Staying human while operating professionally

The Public Doesn't Need More Information

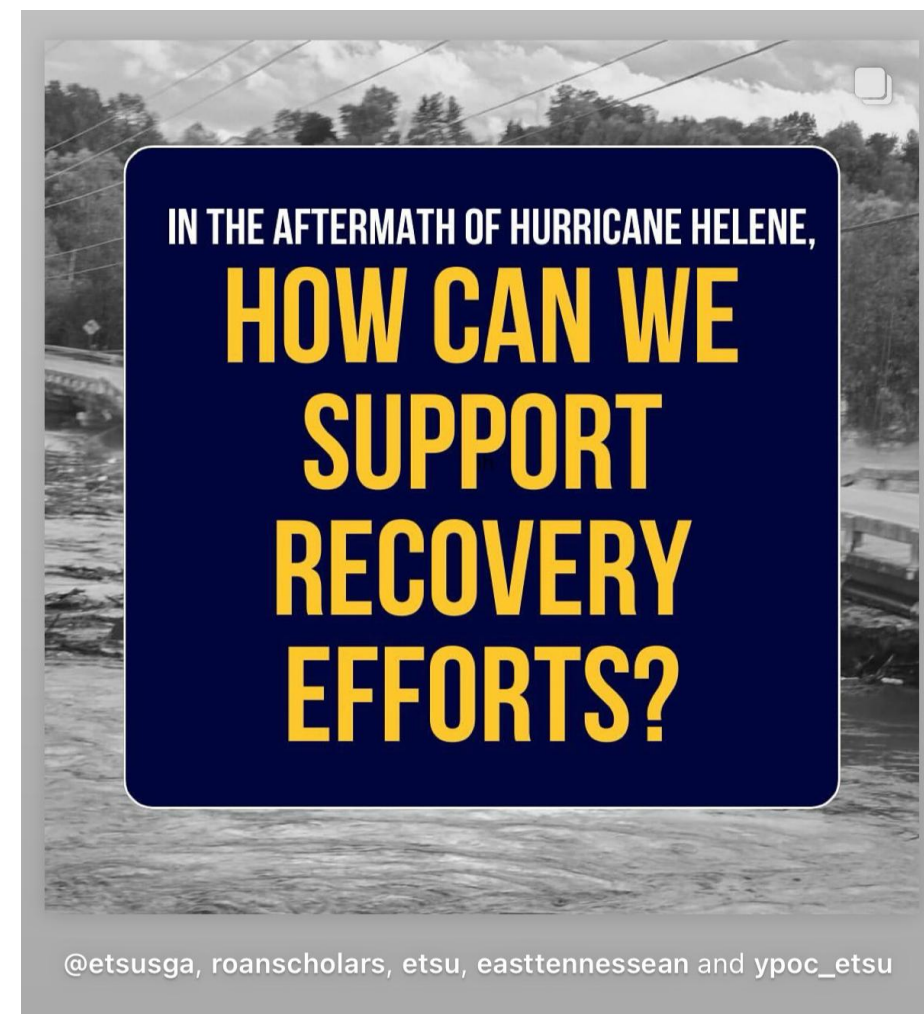
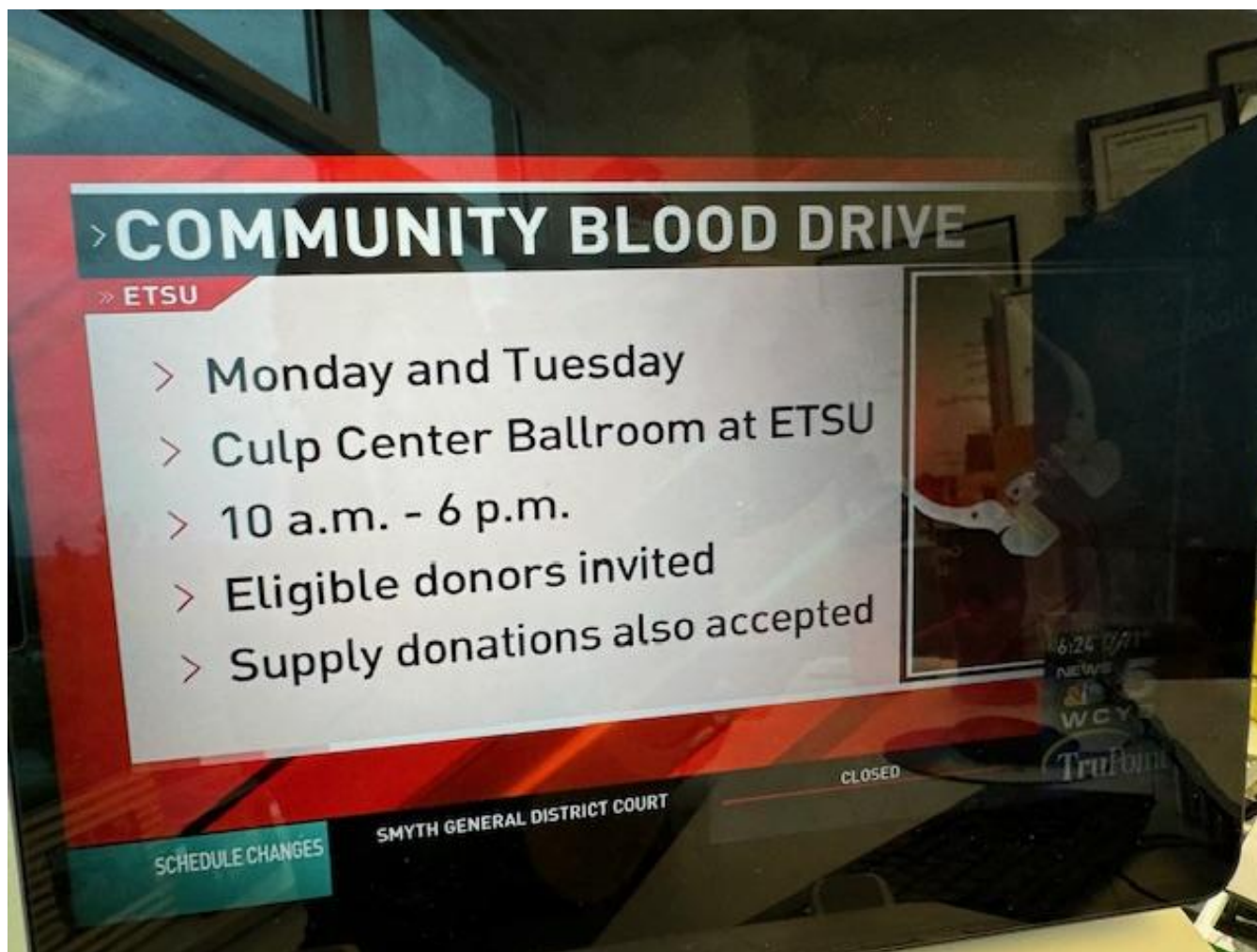
They need useful information.

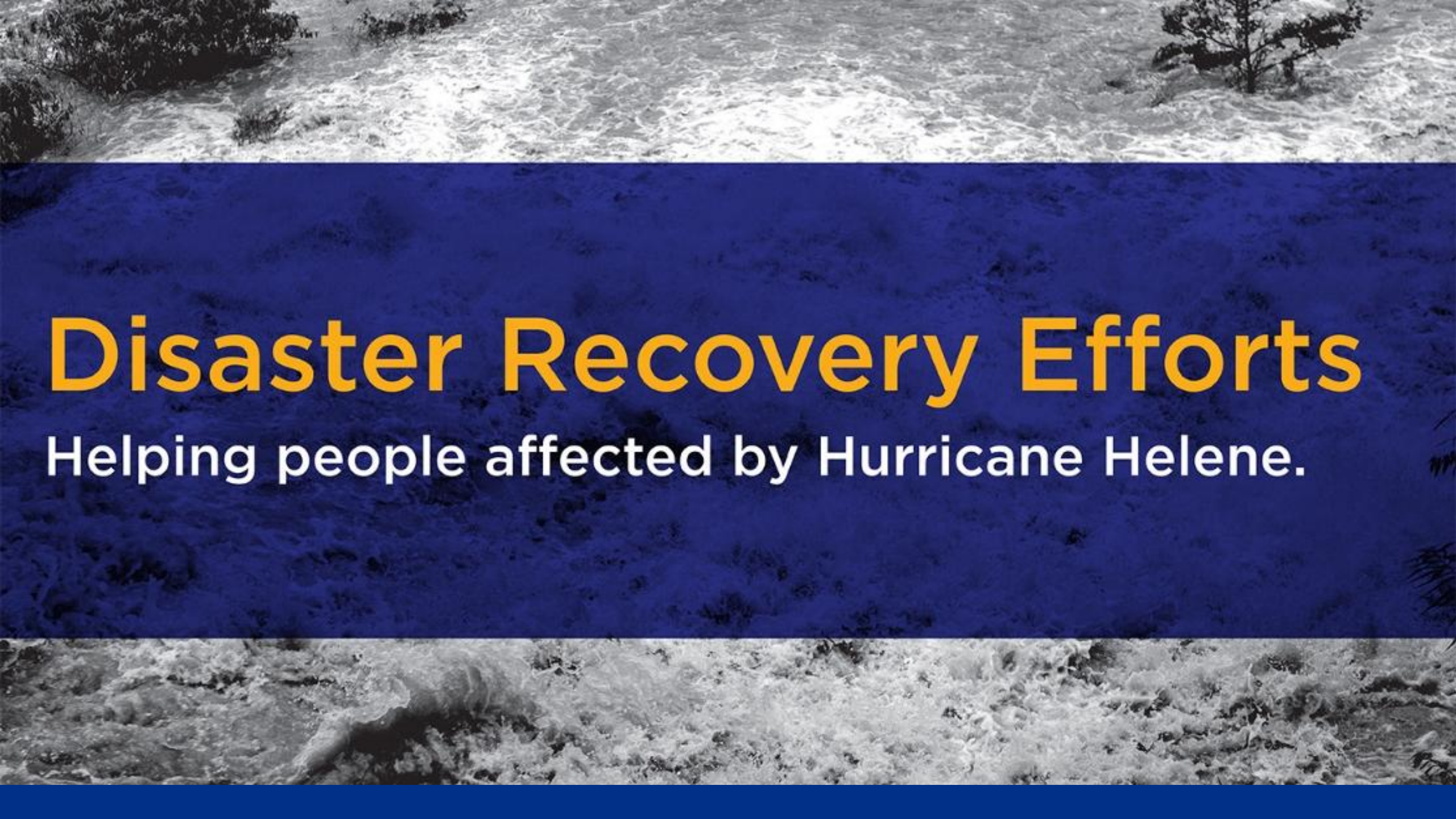
- What happened?
- Am I safe?
- What should I do?
- Where can I go?
- What services are available?
- What has changed?
- How can I help?
- When will I hear from you again?

The Public Doesn't Need More Information

They need useful information.

- Think about resources other than money – blood products, non-perishable items
- Create a microsite or alert banners
- They *will* call you. What will you do?
- Lean on partner organizations
- Translation services for forms, signs, press events
- Assure behavioral health support
- Consider future milestones and trigger moments – is this scalable?



An aerial photograph of a coastline with waves crashing against the shore. A dark blue horizontal band is overlaid across the center of the image, serving as a background for the text.

Disaster Recovery Efforts

Helping people affected by Hurricane Helene.

Communication Cadence Creates Confidence

When you don't have new information, communicate that you don't have new information.

- “We don't have additional information at this time. We are continuing to assess conditions and will provide another update at 2 p.m.”

**Silence creates an information vacuum.
Someone else will fill it.**

Questions communicators should ask *before* the next crisis:

- What are we documenting?
- Where does it live?
- Who owns it?
- What is discoverable?
- What must be retained?

The Crisis Communications Resilience Framework

- **READY**
Prepare people, processes and platforms.
- **RECOGNIZE**
Establish what is actually happening.
- **RESPOND**
Communicate quickly, accurately and transparently.
- **REINFORCE**
Maintain cadence, consistency and trust.
- **RECOVER**
Document, evaluate and improve.

Every crisis should make you better at the next one.

- What worked
- What didn't
- What surprised us
- What we changed

**Don't test your crisis plan
during your crisis.**

Build Your Plan Before the Next Crisis

- Identify your communications command structure.
- Define who can approve what—and when.
- Build your executive briefing template.
- Establish your documentation and retention protocols.
- Run a 30-minute crisis tabletop simulation with your team.

Before & After



Unicoi County Hospital

2018



2024



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Questions?

- Please be sure to complete the session evaluation on the mobile app!

Molly Luton



Molly Luton is Chief Strategic Communications Officer for Ballad Health, where she leads enterprise communications, executive messaging, crisis response, media relations, government affairs communications, and executive thought leadership for a \$3 billion integrated health system serving more than one million people. With nearly 20 years of healthcare leadership experience, she has held executive roles spanning strategic communications, marketing, brand management, and physician relations across academic medicine, children's healthcare, and integrated delivery systems. She has guided organizations through two major health system mergers, four hospital builds, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Hurricane Helene. A trusted advisor to executive leadership, Molly holds a master's degree in Integrated Marketing and Communications from Georgetown University and serves on the Emory & Henry University Board of Trustees.



Our Mission



■ **Mission**

Honor those we serve
by delivering the best
possible care



■ **Vision**

Build a legacy of
superior health by
listening to and
caring for those
we serve



■ **Values**

Creativity
Caring
Honesty
Respect
Faith
Quality



Size, Scale and Presence



20

hospitals
(including Level I trauma and
a dedicated children's hospital)



13,000

team members



800

employed providers in
over 200 locations



88,000

annual inpatient discharges



202,000

adjusted discharges



\$2.7 billion

annual revenue



3.1 million

annual outpatient visits



384,000

annual ED visits



207,000

urgent care visits



64,400

telehealth visits



51,750

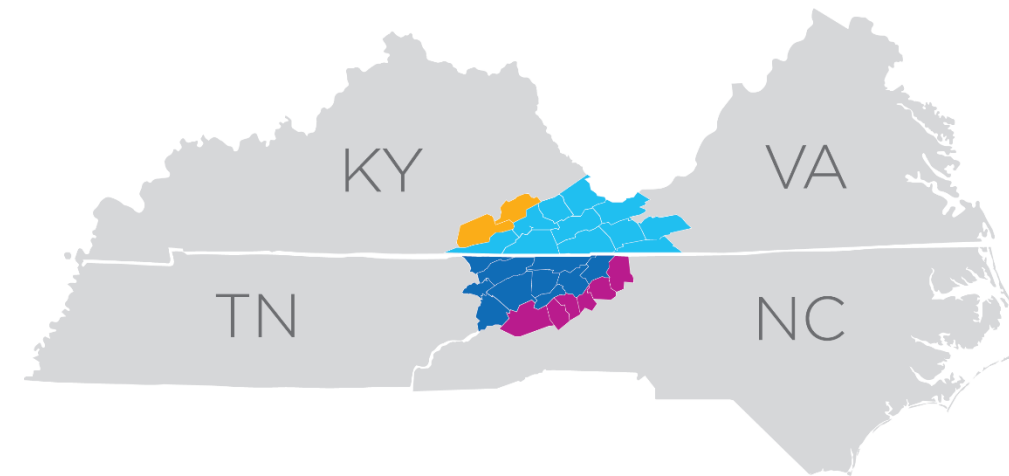
surgeries



6,500

deliveries

Geographic Footprint



967,500

population

8,600

square miles



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