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Team Kentucky Dispatches ‘Highway Heroes’ To Help North Carolina Department of Transportation Rebuild Roads

Hundreds assisting communities in aftermath of Hurricane Helene

FRANKFORT, Ky. (Oct. 28, 2024) – Along the newly patched Bee Tree Road by the Learning Community School stands a simple sign. On it, a message reads, “Kentucky DOT, We (heart) you! Thank you, TLC.”

The school in flood-ravaged Swannanoa, North Carolina, which lost its highway access four weeks ago when remnants of Hurricane Helene washed away the pavement, reopened last week as dozens of Team Kentucky highway crews work hand in hand with the North Carolina Department of Transportation (DOT).

More than 2,000 North Carolina DOT employees have reopened nearly 900 roads, and are coordinating a multibillion-dollar restoration effort that includes reopening 400 more roads and cleanup of 7,500 damage sites where Kentucky crews are lending a hand.

“Kentucky transportation workers in North Carolina are helping to speed the recovery process and are allowing North Carolina crews to spread out to help more people, more quickly,” said Gov. Andy Beshear. “When it comes to looking out for our neighbors, whether they live next door, in the next county or in another state, I’m incredibly grateful we have public servants who don’t hesitate to answer that call.”

More than 200 Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) crew members from every corner of the state are or have been on the front lines in North Carolina cutting trees, clearing mudslides, replacing culverts, shoring up eroded highways, and rebuilding roadways.

After torrential rains, flooding and mudslides tore through Boone, Asheville and other regions of western North Carolina on Sept. 25-27, transportation officials sent out a call for assistance.

The KYTC answered by dispatching state highway technicians, mechanics and engineering staff from across the state – just as they did in 2022 in response to the Eastern Kentucky floods – as well as trucks, excavators, pipes and other equipment. The first 10-person crews deployed Oct. 3-4 from the Lexington, Flemingsburg, Jackson and Pikeville highway districts.

Since then, additional teams from the Manchester, Madisonville, Bowling Green, Elizabethtown, Somerset, Louisville and Covington highway districts have deployed, and KYTC is keeping up to 120 crew members on duty in three hard-hit western North Carolina counties as teams rotate out every other week.

Coordinating with the North Carolina DOT, each crew reports to a damaged roadway and works long hours to restore safe access.

Most work is occurring on low-volume roads, helping North Carolina concentrate resources on larger projects along primary roads, including interstate repairs and the more than 120 bridges that need replaced.

Kentucky's work includes hauling rock to fill in holes carved out by floodwaters, removing debris, replacing pipes, restoring shoulders or ditchlines, and more.

“Our crews have already made a difference in the lives of countless North Carolinians,” said KYTC Secretary Jim Gray. “They’ve been highly commended by residents and officials alike because they’re self-sufficient and know a thing or two about how to respond to broken roads – having dealt with our own tornadoes and floods just a few short years ago. We’re proud they’re there to share the spirit and the muscle of that experience to restore communities, to help our neighbors.”

Making a Difference

On Odes Wilson Road near Boone, North Carolina, highway crews from the Pikeville district worked to install new pipes, shore up the highway, and make it passable so North Carolina crews can fully restore it to before-flood conditions.

Like many crews, they heard daily thank yous yelled out of car windows as people pass worksites.

Tina Houston, owner of Betty's Biscuits, a food truck and brick-and-mortar restaurant in Boone, went further and messaged KYTC to say, “You all have saved our neighborhood. Truly unbelievable. We are so grateful for the effort and long days these guys have generously spent helping here. We will forever be thankful.”

On Bee Tree Road in Swannanoa, crews from the Manchester highway district – with help from Louisville area crews – hauled more than 300 truck loads of rock and material to reconstruct whole lanes of the roadway.

Their days of work drew praise from not only residents but also the Learning Community School and its families.

“Thank you for the heroes you sent to help ... who are rebuilding the road to my children’s school in Swannanoa,” said Lindsay Hensley, in an email to KYTC. “It is truly helping the kids get back to a sense of normalcy and routine. We appreciate your employees sacrificing time within their own community to help ours – what a tremendous gift.”

Countless others have acknowledged that gift as well, from local residents waving them over to porches to say thank you or offer a little of their own food, even if they don’t have much, in gratitude, to bags of cookies handed out to a Flemingsburg district crew with handwritten notes that read, “Thank you, Kentucky heroes!”

Social media posts by residents, local newspapers, community groups and blogs have called attention not only to North Carolina DOT’s commitment to rebuild roadways and communities in the wake of disaster, but have also featured Kentucky highway crew members – often with photos that highlight the dramatic difference before and after cleanup efforts.

Recently, an entire work crew from the Somerset highway district walked into an Asheville steakhouse and received a standing ovation.

“Our crews don’t do this for the recognition, but they’ve certainly earned it,” said Secretary Gray. “It’s inspiring and it shows the spirit, talent and dedication of our employees, and it also shows how they’re helping folks out in a needed and timely way.”

Gray went on to say, “Like Gov. Beshear often says, ‘Remember the story of the Good Samaritan, and let’s act it out whenever we can.’ Well, our folks are doing just that.”

Gray also thanked the dozens of administrative support staff, equipment experts, radio technicians, safety teams and crew families who are making the North Carolina mission possible.

“Public service doesn’t stop at a state line, and I’m thankful that our highway heroes always give 100% wherever they work,” he said.

KYTC will continue its deployments through late November to assist in flood and storm relief efforts.

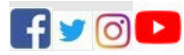
Other Kentucky state agencies and personnel are also assisting in western North Carolina, Tennessee, Florida and elsewhere in the aftermath of the two recent hurricanes, Helene and Milton.

The Kentucky Arts Council and Kentucky State Police are among agencies supporting communities in areas affected by the storms. Alongside highway crews, all those aiding in hurricane recovery were [named Team Kentucky All-Stars](#) last week by Gov. Beshear.

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Editors: A [MediaBox of photos and videos](#) of KYTC crews deploying to or working in North Carolina is available online.

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