Matthew and Florence: Who They Left Behind

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In October 2016, Hurricane Matthew unexpectedly hit Southeastern and Eastern North Carolina, and in its wake, left unprecedented amounts of flooding and damage to the area. Less than two years later, Hurricane Florence struck and wreaked havoc on residents who were still recovering. The second disaster left residents of Robeson and surrounding counties in poor living conditions, if their homes had survived the second blow at all.

“Hurricane Matthew was much more difficult for us because in addition to having to do all this stuff at the last minute with very little warning, we also spent seven months of being essentially homeless.” said James Bass. “We had nowhere to go.”

Bass, the executive director of the Givens Performing Arts Center at UNC Pembroke, suffered tremendous damage to his home when Hurricane Matthew hit. Bass, who lived in Lumberton at the time, said he had nearly three feet of water in his yard which entered below his house and soaked his floorboards and everything underneath. “You couldn’t visibly see it at first,” he said. “But on further inspection, I mean, it was totaled. Everything underneath the house was destroyed.”

Mold quickly began to grow in his flooring, causing him and his family to hastily move their belongings out of their home and into storage. After months of relocating, Bass and his family were able to move in and live in their newly renovated home, only to have Hurricane Florence force them to start the process all over again 16 months later.

This region of the state is recognized as a hundred-year floodplain, meaning it has a 1 percent chance of flooding in any given year. However, Martin Farley, chair of the geology and geography department of UNC Pembroke, describes the area as one of the lowest points of the state, making it considerably prone to flooding and its residents susceptible to danger and damage.

Though survivors of the storm have reached out to FEMA for help, many of them have either received limited assistance, or found themselves ineligible for assistance, and are stuck in unlivable conditions with little to no resources or funds to fix them. Pembroke resident, Lynn Jacobs has lived on the same plot of land for over 70 years and said he has never experienced a catastrophe like what Matthew and Florence has caused.

Jacobs suffered damages underneath his trailer due to flooding, and to the insulation of his home due to the heavy rain. The moisture caused by the unending rain resulted in mold growing inside Jacobs’s home, and his prolonged exposure to it landed him in the hospital for a total of 11 days. “[The hospital] didn’t know what it was, come to find out it was the mold,” Jacobs said. “It was in the house and I didn’t know it.”

Jacobs was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, or a-fib, due to the long-term exposure to the mold in his house. A-fib is an irregular heartbeat that can cause blood clots, stroke, or heart failure amongst other heart-related complications. He now stays in a camper he owns parked right in front of his house while he waits for FEMA to return with more assistance.

Jacobs and Bass among other homeowners found difficulty in receiving government assistance in their bouts with the hurricanes. As of March 8, 139,813 households have registered for disaster assistance, but only 103,724 FEMA inspections have been completed, according to the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. Additionally, 175 households (with 513 household members) are still in hotels through FEMA's Transitional Sheltering Assistance program.

Jacobs said when FEMA visited to assess the damages to his home and saw he had nowhere to go, they gave him money for rental assistance and said they would come back to see what they could do about his house. Jacobs said he hasn’t heard from them since then.

Bass said it wasn’t until three months after Matthew hit when he was informed of the amount of damage he suffered and the cost to repair it. In addition to that, Bass said he found multiple errors in his flood insurance company’s reports, prompting him to file a complaint to the NC Insurance Commission.

Bass’s homeowner’s insurance company said his family was eligible to be reimbursed for the six months of having their belongings in storage, as it qualified as moving expenses. When the family provided receipts of their storage, the company then told them they could not be reimbursed because they were required to file a claim before the storm hit, forcing the family to pay those fees out of pocket. “In other words, we were supposed to predict that a storm was going to come, our home was going to be flooded, and we were going to move out,” Bass said. “That’s impossible.”

FEMA also told the family that since they had flood insurance, they were only eligible for rental assistance. Bass said he applied for that assistance six times and was denied each time. On the seventh application, FEMA granted the family what they considered to be two months of rent payment, which only lasted the family one month.

Bass said his ordeal with FEMA and his insurance companies after Hurricane Matthew helped him prepare for the aftermath of Hurricane Florence where he faced actual flooding inside his house.

Some homeowners are facing difficulty with contractors, like Newport resident, Mary Madsen. “You pull in the driveway and all you can see is blue.” she said referring to the blue tarp covering the exposed parts of her roof. Madsen, a hair stylist who works out her own home, says she has been in contact with contractors to repair her water-damaged roof, but contractors were having trouble working with her schedule. “I still got a business to run so I can pay them,” she said. “All this time and we still haven’t figured it out.”

The devastation that Hurricane Florence caused provided an overwhelming amount of work for local contractors. In most areas, there was more damage than there were contractors to fix them, leaving residents on a waitlist for months to come. However, in the midst of the wreckage, some contractors are having trouble finding work in their own place of business.

Before Florence hit, FEMA had already awarded the prime contract for temporary housing services to MLU Services, a company based in Athens, Georgia. At least two companies in the Eastern North Carolina region, located where Florence hit the hardest, were unable to offer their own proposals. One of them was Steve Stone Mobile Home Transport in Lumberton.

"When there's a natural disaster and the government gets involved, local contractors should have an opportunity to participate,” said owner, Steve Stone. “In my opinion, this was a violation of the Stafford Act.”

The Stafford Act requires government to prefer local companies for disaster recovery contracts. According to FEMA, a pre-approved contractor is needed for large disasters where locals would not be able to fully respond. Spokeswoman Yvonne Smith said the prime contract was awarded to MLU Services in accordance with the Post-Katrina Reform Act of 2006 and FEMA policies, which call for the hiring of a prime contractor in advance of disasters in order to speed the housing response. Despite this, Stone said that the damage caused by Florence was on a scale that local contractors could handle if they were given the chance.

Stone said he prides himself on being reliable in his work and providing temporary housing swiftly. "We were local people, we were on the ground, we knew how to get [people] in these houses in a week or two." The average turnaround time for Stone and his crew to get residents in temporary housing was about 7-10 days. Meanwhile, MLU Services’s turnaround time ranged from 5-7 weeks.

In addition to getting the short end of the stick from the government, visiting contractors from nearby cities have encountered many homeowners who are wary of scams by crews who aren’t local to them and contractors who overcharge and provide scanty work. Their skepticism could slow recovery efforts because there are not enough local contractors to handle all the destruction.

Greyson Katz, a freelance contractor working in Eastern North Carolina, said that the clients he had gotten were ripped off by storm chasers, contractors who travel to affected areas and do subpar work. “We had a roof that didn’t have felt paper, which is essential [for repair],” Katz said. “The ones who were time crunching just threw a roof on the old roof.”

Some unlicensed contractors have taken payments from customers but didn’t provide any service. Katz said his grandmother’s neighbor had someone offer them tree removal services then vanished with their money.

Seven months after Hurricane Florence hit, both homeowners and contractors are working with each other to mend their communities. Some residents are moved in newly renovated homes while others remain in temporary housing, or in their damaged dwellings in unlivable conditions, awaiting assistance that may never come. “All we can do is wait,” said Jacobs. “I’m still hopeful.”