

# *Navigating the “Bureaucratic Beast” in North Carolina Hurricane Recovery*

**Amanda J. Reinke and Erin R. Eldridge**

Hurricane Florence swept up the eastern United States coast and slowly moved through North Carolina as a tropical storm in September 2018. Producing twenty to thirty inches of rain, Florence caused dangerous flooding, displacement, and widespread wind damage and power outages. While coastal areas were hard hit by the storm, many impoverished in-land areas spanning multiple river basins were also heavily flooded. Although the winds have ceased and the waters receded, the disaster continues to unfold in bureaucratic contexts with uneven effects temporally and spatially for affected locals. Local organizations and the Federal Emergency Management Agency assess damages, process funding applications, and work to rebuild. Drawing on ten months of ethnographic research in Cumberland County, NC, we illuminate the ways in which the temporality of bureaucratic processes is a form of bureaucratic violence that exacerbates suffering in the context of crisis and how local organizations attempt to recover and rebuild in the face of pervasive top-down bureaucratic obstacles.

Key words: Federal Emergency Management Agency, disaster recovery, bureaucracy, bureaucratic violence, United States

## **Introduction**

In September of 2018, Hurricane Florence swept up the eastern United States coast and slowly moved through North Carolina as a tropical storm. It was the wettest tropical storm on record for the Carolinas, producing twenty to thirty inches of rain, but also causing dangerous flooding, displacement, and widespread wind damage and power outages. Coastal areas such as New Bern and Wilmington were hard hit by the storm, but many in-land areas in multiple river basins were also heavily flooded. Some of the most impoverished areas of North Carolina are in the southeastern part of the state—areas heavily impacted by Hurricane Matthew in 2016 and again by Florence. As the region tries to recover and rebuild, affected individuals and communities face long-term bureaucratic obstacles and challenges in applying for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funding as well as charity support and assistance.

This article draws on ten months of ethnographic research in North Carolina to demonstrate how bureaucratic processes exacerbate suffering in the context of crisis and

how local communities and organizations attempt to recover and rebuild in the face of pervasive top-down bureaucratic obstacles. Bureaucracies associated with disasters include FEMA but also include local long-term recovery groups (LTRGs), charity organizations, and volunteers all seeking to help affected communities and individuals. In this article, we consider bureaucracies not as stagnant entities but rather dynamic in form, process, and personnel. We contextualize recovery obstacles as bureaucratic violence, a form of everyday violence in which “red tape” perpetuates suffering for citizens.

## **Methods**

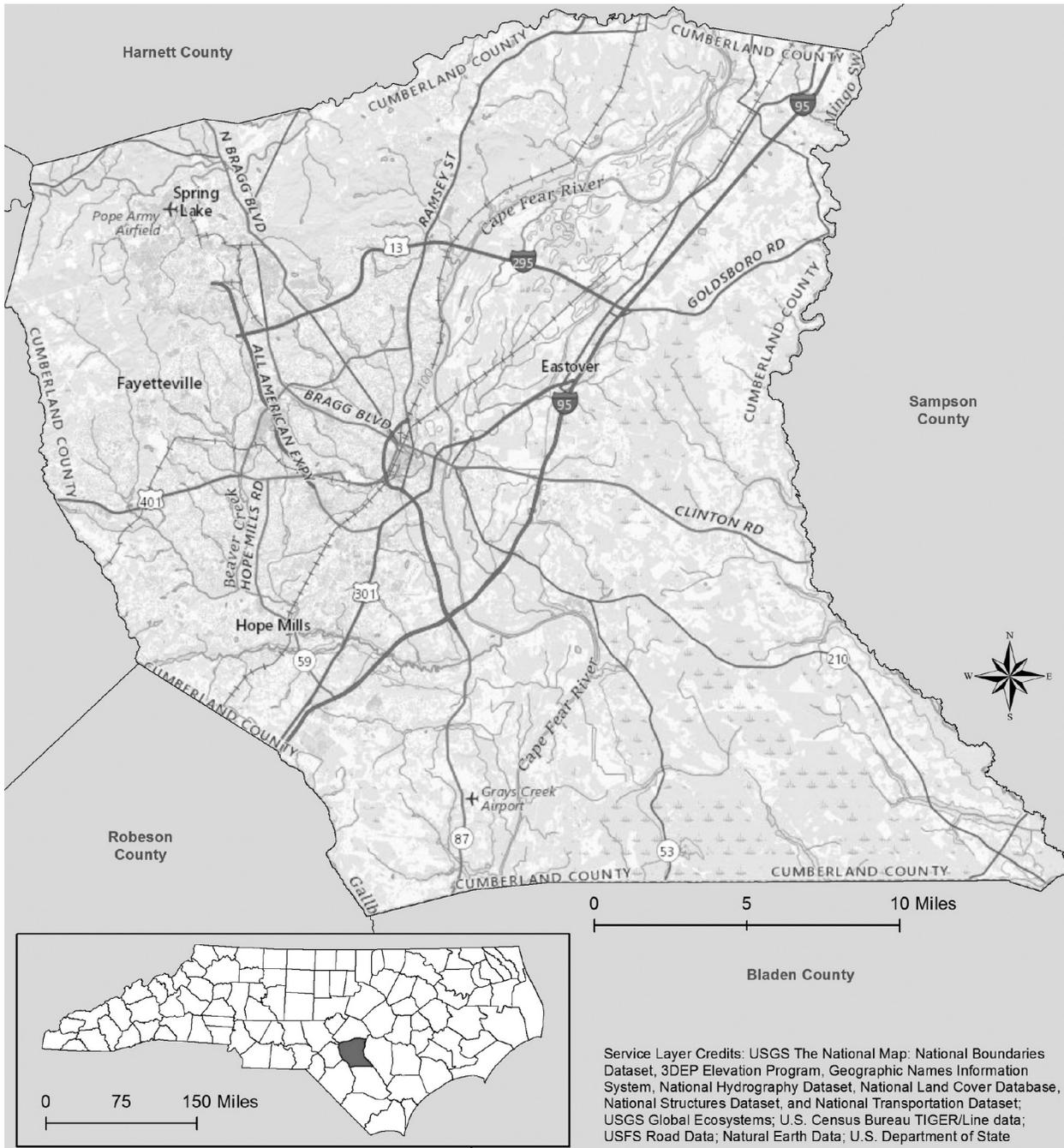
Our research is in Cumberland County, North Carolina, which is situated along the Cape Fear River. Many areas of Cumberland County are prone to flooding, and flood waters can become especially dangerous during a storm, as wastewater plants, large industrial animal farm operations, and coal ash water sites become inundated throughout the broader River Basin. Cumberland County includes the city of Fayetteville, several towns such as Spring Lake and Hope Mills, and is also adjacent to the United States Army’s Fort Bragg military installation, the largest United States Army post by population (see Figure 1).

This project investigates nonprofit, state, and local government employees’ and affected community members’ perceptions of hurricane recovery efforts, specifically the bureaucratic processes and interplay among organizations operating in the region. Primary data collection in Cumberland County began in September 2018 immediately after the

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*Amanda J. Reinke is an Assistant Professor of Conflict Management at Kennesaw State University. Reinke is an applied anthropologist specializing in the structural and bureaucratic violence of disaster recovery, community peacebuilding, and conflict management efforts in the United States. Erin R. Eldridge is a Lecturer of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. Eldridge’s research focuses on political ecological concerns, socioecological violence, bureaucracy, and the intersections of development and disasters.*

**Figure 1. USGS Map of Cumberland County, Including Fayetteville, Spring Lake, Hope Mills, and the Cape Fear River**



storm and is ongoing. While both researchers are trained in disaster studies and violence theories, our interests in this project initially began because Erin Eldridge was working and residing in Fayetteville during Hurricane Florence. Given her firsthand experience of the storm and research experience on the political ecological impacts of disasters in the southeastern United States and Amanda's background

working violence literatures, especially bureaucratic and administrative violence, we obtained swift IRB approval to begin ethnographic investigation in the wake of the storm. Given pre-existing contacts and networks in the area with various nonprofits, we were quickly allowed access to public and private events and activities for observation and, as a result, possible interviewees.

The authors have conducted semi-structured interviews with over twenty participants, as well as one interview-turned-focus group with twenty-three participants. Interview participants include government, nonprofit, and contract employees who are directly serving the Cumberland County area by assessing on-the-ground needs, processing paperwork, and providing direct financial or material support to affected locals.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, we have also engaged in non-participant observation and informal interviews at nonprofit meetings, a local town hall, a disaster preparation workshop, a mold remediation workshop, a national disaster volunteers meeting, crisis counseling outreach events, and at a FEMA outreach location. Participants include local, national, and international nonprofit employees, as well as locals affected by the recent hurricanes in the area. Several of the workers and volunteers we interviewed and observed were also directly affected by the storm and provided key insights into understanding their perspective as both survivor and relief or recovery provider.

### **Bureaucratic Violence in Disasters**

As anthropologists have argued elsewhere (Bear and Mathur 2015; Bernstein and Mertz 2011; Eldridge 2018; Eldridge and Reinke 2018; Gupta 2012; Reinke 2018), bureaucracies are not stagnant structures but rather are dynamic, interactive sociocultural worlds that shape everyday realities in myriad ways. Within bureaucratic spaces, decisions are made, knowledge is produced, power is shifted, and values and goals are imagined and reimaged (Bernstein and Mertz 2011; Eldridge and Reinke 2018). Although bureaucratic entities may be depicted as monolithic institutions, ethnographic inquiry has revealed their existence as a “hyper-credentialized world” (Graeber 2015:41), where documentation is key in the struggle for access to resources (Sheehan 2018); where relationships among corporations, law, and human rights regimes continually shift (Guyol-Meinrath Echeverry 2018); and where power dynamics between settler-colonial states and Indigenous peoples are reified (Kim 2018). People control these bureaucratic spaces and processes, and their decisions have on-the-ground impacts for citizens.

Connecting research on bureaucracies with studies on the multiple dimensions of violence, scholars also point to the ways in which violence is enacted and perpetuated through normalized administrative processes and decision making (Eldridge 2018; Eldridge and Reinke 2018; Graeber 2015; Gupta 2012; Rajan 2001; Tyner and Rice 2015). S. Ravi Rajan (2001), for example, illustrates how bureaucratic violence plays out in the aftermath of the Bhopal catastrophe, describing bureaucratic violence as an “everyday form of violence” delivered by bureaucrats that manifests through several processes, including the absence of effective regulation and emergency planning, the lack of transparency, and bureaucratic rituals, routines, and accounting that inadequately address pain and suffering. Similarly, in an examination of

coal ash calamities, Erin Eldridge (2018) reveals the role of bureaucratic absence, delays, inaction, and interference in the socioecological violence normalized and perpetuated through coal ash policies and practices and how those processes effect on-the-ground realities in communities living near coal ash waste sites.

Scholars have also investigated the bureaucratic infrastructures that variously construct and underscore vulnerabilities in disaster aftermaths and qualifications for recovery and relief support. During Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts, as described by Reid (2013), FEMA policies and practices that assumed a “middle-class” family structure model for rental relief underscored the problematic distinction between the “deserving” victims and the “undeserving” welfare cheats. FEMA’s “unclear and slow-moving” rental assistance review process specifically left those in low economic standing and in extended or shared households waiting in precarious living situations, leading to sociotemporal marginalization (Reid 2013). Investigating two New Orleans neighborhoods following Katrina, Kroll-Smith, Baxter, and Jenkins (2015:89) detail how disaster assistance became a source of “profound anxiety and fatigue” or even “a second calamity” due to the “vagaries of eligibility criteria” and the obstacle-laden paths many people had to navigate to access individual assistance from FEMA. Veronica Pareja (2019) similarly examines the “second storm” of Superstorm Sandy, referring to the bureaucratic and legal entanglements experienced by homeowners during the recovery process. In this case, abstruse grant and loan processes and fraudulent insurance practices stymied the ability of thousands of homeowners to receive FEMA relief and insurance coverage needed to rebuild their homes.

In these contexts, bureaucracy manifests in many forms with outcomes that span the violence continuum (Eldridge and Reinke 2018; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004), which encompasses overlapping dimensions of physical, structural (Farmer 2004), symbolic (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004), and slow violence (Nixon 2011). In particular, the pace of bureaucratic work enacts violence on those affected by disaster. Bureaucratic regimes and much of the disaster research and literature rely upon linear models of time to consider the impacts and effects of disaster. Studies of “during disaster” time consider the ways in which normative and structural marginalization become enhanced, uncertainty pronounced, and human-environment relations altered (Petersen 2014; Rodríguez-Giralt, Tirado, and Tironi 2014). Researchers studying disaster aftermaths consider the technologies of recovery, official and unofficial narratives of disasters and bureaucratic response, and reconfigurations of political subjectivities (Easthope and Mort 2014; Roberts 2006; Tironi 2014). Pre-disaster time is framed as anticipatory and a time for preparedness, precaution, and mitigation—a time to prevent or lessen a hazard’s impact on loss of life and economy (Anderson 2010; FEMA 2017a; Weszkalnys 2014).

Despite widespread use of linear time among disaster policymakers, practitioners, and scholars, disasters do not unfold linearly and uniformly across time and space. Disasters, which

are prefigured by human relationships with the biophysical world, may manifest from a variety of slow and rapid-onset processes and thus have root causes and triggering agents that are discontinuous across time and space (Oliver-Smith 2002). Bureaucratic decisions in disaster contexts are made at varying scales and intervals, leading to uneven landscapes of preparedness, relief, and recovery. Bureaucratic violence can thus unfold as a form of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011:2-6), with dispersed effects and a pace that evades visibility and media scrutiny. Lingering impacts can affect feelings of time for those experiencing disaster. For example, David Scott (2014) conceptualizes time in the aftermath of political catastrophe as a “stalled present” in which those affected by catastrophe develop an awareness and attunement to time; time during aftermaths becomes visible and conspicuous.

Following the above conceptualizations, we consider how the bureaucratic regimes of disaster recovery, especially FEMA applications and decision making, affect the everyday realities of disaster recovery for disaster-affected communities. In this paper, we frame the stalled present of bureaucratic processes, including applying for assistance and waiting for recovery, as a form of bureaucratic violence. To illustrate how those bureaucratic processes not only inadequately address suffering, but also compound it, this paper focuses first on government recovery processes from federal to city levels and then describes how those processes play out in Cumberland County.

### **FEMA and the Top-Down “Bureaucratic Beast” of Disaster Recovery**

Until the mid-twentieth century, federal spending on disasters in the United States was minimal but gradually expanded following the 1927 Mississippi Flood and a series of legislative actions (Jerolleman 2019), such as the Federal Disaster Relief Act of 1950, the National Flood Insurance Act (1968), and Disaster Relief Act amendments throughout the early 1970s. The Federal Emergency Management Agency was created in April 1979 by then President Jimmy Carter to consolidate federal disaster-related activities into one agency. FEMA is primarily responsible for coordinating the federal government’s disaster preparedness, prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery. In 1988, the Stafford Act became the centerpiece of disaster legislation policy, defining key terminology, cost-sharing plans, and mitigation. FEMA is responsible for following the Act’s provisions as well as coordinating, provisioning, and disseminating relief according to the Act, which was later amended in 2000 (see Moss, Schellhamer, and Berman 2009).

In the aftermath of 9/11, FEMA became subsumed under the then-newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This move continues to pose organizational and logistical challenges for FEMA as the agency navigates the increased bureaucratization of their work within the broader Department (Dave 2015; Maltz 2019). FEMA’s subsequent failures during Hurricanes Katrina and Maria have been

widely criticized and have long-term repercussions for the economic, sociocultural, and political well-being and relationships of those living in affected areas (Browne 2013; Craemer 2010; Dave 2015; Maltz 2019; White House 2006).

FEMA plays an important role in the aftermath of domestic disasters. When FEMA is activated for a disaster zone, they provide immediate relief support and provide financial support for long-term recovery efforts to individuals, local governments, and nonprofits. For example, FEMA grants provide some financial assistance to individuals affected by a federally declared disaster, including funds for temporary housing, rental assistance, home repairs, and other needs. Grants, which are adjusted annually, are typically capped at levels that do not cover full restoration; grant recipients living in FEMA designated flood zones are also required to purchase and maintain flood insurance on the damaged property. A related federal agency provides Small Business Administration (SBA) loans, which can be paired with FEMA grants. SBA loans vary in interest rates and amount, but they can be allotted to individuals as well as businesses. SBA is a loan and must be paid back, whereas FEMA grants are a lump sum provided to successful applicants with no expectation of repayment.

Some of our research participants in Cumberland County have not been approved by FEMA or SBA but have extensive damage to their properties from Florence, while others have been approved by FEMA or SBA but for amounts that are far less than the costs of repairing damages. Both FEMA and SBA processes are highly bureaucratic. The applications are cumbersome and technocratic but key to accessing much needed financial resources. Locals express frustration at the paperwork required to evidence damages and the number of community and city meetings they attend where they seem to only receive more pamphlets rather than substantive support in evidencing damage, completing paperwork, and following-up with FEMA and SBA on appeals. At outreach events, they were frequently told by FEMA representatives to “call the 1-800 number” with their questions and concerns—a suggestion that only garnered more frustration for disaster survivors who have spent untold numbers of hours completing paperwork and waiting on hold for FEMA support and assistance.

At the county and nonprofit levels, FEMA funnels funds through numerous state agencies for appropriation to disaster relief and recovery. Reflecting on funding for Hurricane Matthew, Cumberland County Commissioner Keefe stated (Barnes 2018), “I think history will reflect that the biggest disaster to come out of Hurricane Matthew was the funding model used to help communities get back on their feet.” Following Matthew, North Carolina was deemed a “Slow Spender State” because it took over a year for officials to process federal funds. State administrators suggested that the slow pace is a result of previous cuts in state staff with the expertise for handling grants, as well as the shift of disaster rebuilding programs from the Commerce Department to the Department of Public Safety (Thrush 2018). To further illustrate, a report from the NC Legislature noted that as of March

2019, the state had only spent 3.1 percent of the \$236.5 million Community Block Development Grant for Disaster Recovery (CBDG-DR) provided by the Department of Housing and Development (North Carolina General Assembly 2019).

For federally declared disasters, FEMA will pay at least 75 percent for state recovery and rebuilding projects, and the remaining costs are covered by state and local governments. According to a staff member in the Fayetteville city office, this financial cost sharing between bureaucratic levels looks like it will be about the same for Hurricane Florence. The local government in this case reportedly did not have to foot the bill for Hurricane Matthew nor will they need to for Florence, although they may have undertaken additional projects of their own accord that were not funded by the state or federal levels.

At the city level, repairs take time, with weeks to months added once federal funding is applied due to the related increase of bureaucratic and administrative requirements. In the case of both Matthew and Florence, this timing meant that the full scope of required repairs was not assessed until the holiday seasons, and bids did not go out until the early months of the following year. During this time, the “stalled present” is visible on the landscape via private and public infrastructures, such as culverts and dams, still damaged from Matthew and awaiting repairs.

The slow top-down approach to recovery is perceived by our disaster-affected local community interlocutors as government complacency or disinterest in making repairs. Making these bureaucratic processes even more complex are layers of damages. Repairs were not complete from Matthew, and some of that infrastructure was subsequently damaged by Florence. One interviewee working with the city exclaimed that managing multiple levels of government and funds for two separate disasters has created a “big obnoxious bureaucratic beast,” and as projects are carried out, they have to “document it, document it, document it” with special attention to which disaster caused what damage. While bureaucratization manifests as detailed documentation, abstruse paperwork, and slow-moving rebuilding projects for city planners and engineers, for many survivors, bureaucratic disaster recovery processes can create, exacerbate, and perpetuate states of precarity.

### **Local Organizations Managing the “Bureaucratic Beast” in Cumberland County**

Unlike Hurricane Matthew, which quickly hit Cumberland County in 2016 and led to immediate and drastic impacts, Florence progressed through the state as a slow moving tropical storm, providing local and state officials more time to prepare and encourage residents to clean out storm drains, stock up on supplies, and evacuate vulnerable areas along the Cape Fear and Little Rivers. In Fayetteville and other cities, officials set up 24-hour call centers and began mobilizing emergency response teams. As the storm neared the state’s coast, FEMA began staging supplies at Fort Bragg.

The gradual pace of the storm, bringing heavy rains over several days, however, meant water levels in some areas exceeded the levels recorded for Hurricane Matthew. While there was some overlap between areas flooded by Matthew and Florence, the persistent, heavy rains also led to flooding in new areas, as well as areas outside of floodplains, which caught some communities off guard. In the months following Florence, the southeastern region of the state continued to get heavy doses of rain, making it difficult for homeowners affected by the tropical storm to effectively dry out their houses, prevent further property damage, and in some cases, return to their homes after displacement.

Residents impacted by hurricanes in Cumberland County are directed toward several resources during and after storms, and a major coordinating body in the county is the county’s LTRG, the Cumberland Disaster Recovery Coalition (CDRC). The coalition formed in response to a large tornado event that swept through the region in 2011 and brought together a range of nonprofits, faith-based, and charitable organizations to address the long-term concerns and unmet needs when federal assistance and insurance pay-outs are unavailable or exhausted. Predominantly funded by Church World Services, it is comprised of several subcommittees involved in case management, unmet needs, finance, volunteer management, as well as other tasks.

When Hurricane Matthew hit in 2016, CDRC’s headquarters flooded, complicating its efforts, but over the years, they have managed to pull together dozens of partner organizations. The coalition frequently mentions the reputation they built as a recovery organization during Matthew, enabling them to respond more quickly and efficiently to Florence. In fact, a 2017 FEMA news release entitled “Long Term Recovery Begins at the Local Level” focuses entirely on CDRC as an exemplary recovery organization (FEMA 2017b).

Long-term recovery groups like CDRC often must juggle cases from multiple disasters and they, like city managers for redevelopment, must track funding from Matthew and Florence projects separately in order to position themselves for future funding. On the ground, these lines can be blurry due to the slow recovery process for Matthew and in cases of dual disaster impact. The ever-thinning funding for Matthew, but continued influx of residents coming forward requesting support and assistance for Matthew damages, is an additional challenge. The care taken by CDRC and similar organizations to position themselves for future funding illustrates the broader challenge of being a local organization partnered with larger umbrella organizations, as well as a not-for-profit charity in a profit-driven economy. As Vincanne Adams (2013:165) notes in *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith*, nonprofit relief organizations sometimes must “hover uncomfortably in the zone between being private nonprofit and corporate-like for-profit.” To sustain their organization, they must, at times, operate like a business and “compete for increasingly stretched resources from both private and public sources.”

In terms of case work, CDRC was still receiving Matthew cases during mid-2019 as they also assisted with Florence recovery. Matthew cases sometimes surface as FEMA-funded crisis counselors identify people who have fallen through the cracks and never received any assistance. In other situations, CDRC receives cases that have been in the hands of North Carolina recovery agencies. There have been situations where CDRC has caseworkers ready and resources for unmet needs, but getting the state to turn over cases to them requires legal “wrangling” with contracts and agreements. The state is not only slow about turning over cases, but accessing data can be frustrating. For example, when CDRC received a dozen password protected Matthew cases from the state, it took additional days just to get the password. Upon access, some of the cases had already been seen and/or rejected by CDRC’s unmet needs committee but were not closed for technical reasons like the presence of white-out on a form. While these incidences may seem small, they accumulate and add to the frustration of recovery work.

Among the Matthew cases to surface in the CDRC office in 2019 was the case of one man whose roof was damaged during Matthew and, because it was never properly repaired, leaked again during Florence. The damage allowed water to come into his house through the vent above his stove. According to him, he was initially denied FEMA funding after Matthew purportedly because the flood waters only came into his yard and not into his home. He was additionally denied assistance from a faith-based recovery group operating at the time because their caseworker incorrectly thought he had a lien on his house, which disqualified him. During a conversation at his home, he mentioned nearly giving up and feeling like “just a name on a list” after over two years. CDRC picked the case back up in 2019 and found that the lien had been in the 1990s and should not have been a disqualifying factor following Matthew. CDRC was able to pull funding from their unmet needs committee and partners to fix his roof.

This case exemplifies CDRC’s ability to adapt and channel resources more efficiently than federal agencies, such as FEMA; however, their ability to do so is generally attributed to their longstanding existence in the community and experience with prior disaster events, including Matthew. Other newly created or poorly organized NC LTRGs may have compromised abilities to navigate these bureaucratic processes collectively, adding to delays in the pace of recovery. Many research participants described dysfunctional aspects of neighboring LTRGs, such as favoritism, community discord, and “lots of fighting.” At a CDRC meeting, for example, one member said he heard about people nearly “coming to blows” with Lutheran Services, and in another county, state disaster caseworkers were kicked out of a committee meeting. These organizational challenges impede a group’s ability to adequately and promptly address diverse community needs and add to recovery delays for survivors.

Additionally, recovery and relief organizations face bureaucratic obstacles from both public and private funders. While state recovery efforts can be painfully slow, grants

from private charitable organizations may have strict spending criteria that do not mesh with the pace of organizations providing services in communities. Barrios (2017) described these constraints in his research following hurricane Mitch in Honduras and Katrina in New Orleans; he found that not only did disaster survivors have difficulty securing the resources needed to recover in meaningful ways, but aid agencies were constrained by cost-benefit analyses that pressured institutional actors to spend budgets within specific time frames. In Cumberland County, the director of a food bank echoed this challenge during an interview as he described grant spending requirements that only address short-term needs and limit the development of long-term goals. According to him, “This is not just an overnight fix...[the donor] gave us \$100,000 and this is for the next 30 days. Wait a second, you know, let me spread this out...because this is not going to be over in 30 days.” These disparities in timing and pace aggravate already-existing hardships of recovery.

### **The Violent Effects of the “Bureaucratic Beast” for Locals**

While organizations like CDRC are more connected to local needs and realities than state and federal agencies and liaisons, recovery processes are still shaped and constrained by broader disaster recovery institutions. In Cumberland County, CDRC directs people to first apply with FEMA. Whether they are approved or denied is typically irrelevant for LTRG assistance; the application and subsequent numerical identifier assists CDRC and local recovery groups while tracking and moving individuals forward in their recovery needs assessment and support process.

Although FEMA sets up outreach posts in places like Lowes and Home Depot in the months following a disaster, individuals are likely to meet FEMA representatives that are not tuned into local needs and are given a stack of wordy pamphlets on the FEMA process. The FEMA representatives we spoke to at one of these locations had been shuffled from various disaster relief and recovery stations; they were not from the area and were unfamiliar with the topography, disaster impacts, and pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. Their stay would be brief before they were reassigned to other federal assistance locations. One interviewee described FEMA representatives as “unbelievably rude” to the extent that they were yelling at the elderly and at other individuals who had difficulty understanding and completing their FEMA assistance applications.

People do not immediately apply for FEMA assistance for various reasons, including unfamiliarity with available assistance programs, confusion, doubts about qualifications, ambitions to do house repairs on their own, fear of government, difficulty getting signatures from all family members listed on property titles, and other obstacles. For example, recovery workers shared their challenges in reaching immigrant and non-native English-speaking communities who fear the government and simultaneously do not want to be

perceived as accepting a government handout. For individuals who do apply for FEMA assistance, the bureaucratic processes of recovery amplify the disaster's emotional toll. An interviewee assisting in shelters reflects on working with the elderly: "Some of them were well in their eighties; they could barely move. They had to apply for FEMA and the elderly sometimes have a really hard time either hearing you or understanding you or just in general can't really communicate well." A roofing contractor reflected on the biggest challenges individuals face in recovery: "The challenge is the red tape" in FEMA applications but also in procuring and navigating recovery support from other organizations. At the time of our interview in August 2019, he had yet to meet any survivors that received FEMA assistance.

The paperwork itself is cumbersome and abstruse, and many applicants are denied because they clicked an incorrect button, checked the wrong box, or did not provide all the required information. Several of the cases described by case workers were initially denied assistance by FEMA because their paperwork was completed or filed incorrectly. Even after navigating the initial paperwork, people can be denied if FEMA inspectors deem their home livable. According to one recovery worker, applicants "get denied and they get discouraged and they're like, 'Well, they denied me'" and give up (personal communication, 2019). The disappointment after an initial denial dissuades many from appealing a FEMA denial. One woman was denied for FEMA assistance twice after losing her home and personal items: "You're looking at a woman who has three kids, single mom, and they have four feet of water in her rental property and she got denied. What? Was that not enough damage?" This client was lucky; a "guardian angel" [disaster caseworker] helped her appeal with FEMA, and by January 2019, she was approved for temporary housing assistance and personal items.

FEMA's voluntary liaisons did receive some praise from disaster recovery groups and staff. According to a local nonprofit disaster recovery staff member, working with the voluntary liaisons is far more effective than trying to call FEMA or work with their paid representatives:

We love them because if we were to go directly to big FEMA, they would shut the door on us. But you have these voluntary FEMA liaisons...and then they come back and give us the information that we need. So anytime we have questions, they're able to answer us and it's been good. We love them. We love them, we love having them at the table!

By contrast, survivor experiences with the agency, its liaisons, as well as state recovery programs were much less positive. One Fayetteville resident—a veteran and grandmother—has been displaced from her home since Hurricane Matthew. The floodwaters went just below the floor line and entered her home through a hole in the floor. The pipes in the house burst after the storm, contributing to water damage. Since the water did not rise into her home, she was denied house repair assistance from FEMA and local recovery groups. The reason for denial was described by her caseworker as a "lack

of maintenance." FEMA and local organizations helped her with temporary shelter and, eventually, access to a mobile home, but after two years, her house still sits abandoned and deteriorating. She stated that she did the paperwork and "got a number" but feels like a name at the bottom of the list. As she waits to hear about other possibilities for assistance from the state and other organizations, she described feeling like her life is at a "standstill" and bogged down with paperwork. "The storm's gone, but the paperwork is still there.... The storm ain't nothing compared to the paperwork," she stated during a conversation outside her now mold-infested home. As the conversation continued, she mentioned disaster recovery paperwork numerous times, describing it as "the killer" and a "monster."

In Spring Lake, where there was heavy flooding during Florence, a resident described a stalled present. She, her husband, and their two grandchildren live in a neighborhood devastated by Florence but did not have flood insurance because they live in an area designated as low risk. Eight months after the flooding, the family was still living together in a small apartment trying to repair their home. While they qualified for and received over \$30,000 for home repairs and temporary housing from FEMA, the estimated damage exceeded \$100,000. They also qualified for an SBA loan and received home insurance pay-outs for tree damage but still exhausted their savings and continue to run up a credit card debt to pay for mortgage, rent, storage fees, and other bills. As they began home repairs, a FEMA representative suggested they apply for a state program aimed at quick home repairs to restore minimal living conditions. When they applied, the assessor told them to halt construction on their home because if they received the grant, the state would cover construction. After halting construction and waiting for a month, the resident called only to find out that she would be receiving a rejection letter. Not only were they rejected because they had too much damage to their home to qualify, but work on their home was stalled, and they had to find new contractors. She described being forced to sit and wait in this situation as "an injustice." Emotionally, she describes "being in a numb place," and "losing sight" of who she is anymore.

Federal assistance for disaster survivors not only requires the rigorous application process, familiarity with institutional communication styles (Browne 2013), and a lot of time but also the capacity to carefully track and document interactions with organizations and expenses in the context of crisis, displacement, and loss. The rules and regulations of government programs are designed to reduce fraud or the duplication of benefits. Jerolleman (2019) explains that most fraud cases are not a result of intentional theft but rather programmatic and contractor errors; yet, post-disaster case studies show that narratives and fears of funding misuse are common and place the added burden of proof on funding recipients.

Once assistance is successfully received, the recovery money must be tracked carefully with receipts. CDRC representatives repeatedly remind applicants to "keep their receipts," record their expenditures, and abide by the spending

guidelines. They are especially concerned as recovery money begins to trickle in during the holiday season, and survivors try to achieve some level of normalcy in their lives. If individuals side-step protocol, they may have difficulty getting government or charitable assistance in the future.

If individuals are denied federal funding, they are encouraged to appeal, but appeals forms require very precise legal wording and, like the other application processes, response times can be slow. During a town hall meeting in Spring Lake, local residents expressed frustration about the system for filing claims and appealing denials. Echoing what Katherine Browne (2013) refers to as the “non-responsive response,” FEMA liaisons in attendance repeatedly told locals to “call the 1-800 number” because “everyone’s case is different,” and they need individual support for their case.

In response, some locals shared experiences about the institutional indifference they faced. One stated that they were denied a loan from SBA and despite repeated calls has gotten no further response to her queries. The SBA representative on-site responded by saying, “Don’t let that discourage you” and urged her to keep calling. At the same meeting, a CDCR representative responded by asking locals to “bear with the system,” reiterating their obligation to go to FEMA and SBA for funding first before seeking assistance elsewhere. While tensions resulting from the “multiple realities and rationalities” among survivors and recovery organizations are commonplace following a catastrophe (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002), the disconnect between institutional protocol and the immediate needs of survivors became a clear source of suffering, anxiety, and exhaustion for those already dealing with the impacts of the disaster.

## Conclusion

The “big obnoxious bureaucratic beast” of hurricane recovery perpetuates violence through technocratic language, abstruse paperwork and bureaucratic processes, and long wait times for support. For disaster survivors, “the system” is characterized by time consuming and confusing bureaucratic recovery processes. These processes dehumanize survivors by thrusting them into an unfamiliar technocratic world in the midst of crisis and reducing them to an application number for case tracking purposes. The pace and complexity of these processes exacerbate stress and anxiety, contribute to perpetual states of recovery, and compound feelings of loss, uncertainty, and helplessness. While some survivors find support and “guardian angels” to help them navigate bureaucratic processes and, in the event of a FEMA denial, appeal their claims, many continue living in precarity and uncertainty, racking up debt to cover expenses spanning two locations. Suggestions from organizations and FEMA representatives to “bear with the system” and continue calling helplines are met with anger, confusion, and frustration.

Disaster researchers have been pointing out the violence of recovery and relief processes for decades; simultaneously, individuals within these bureaucratic institutions have also

pleaded for changes in recovery processes. During statements addressing lessons learned from 2017 disasters, to illustrate, former FEMA Administrator Brock Long acknowledged the need to reduce bureaucratic delays and complexities for disaster survivors:

FEMA is committed to simplifying our processes and putting survivors first. We must look at ways we can streamline our assistance programs to make FEMA’s programs as clear and easy as possible for survivors and grantees to navigate. I have charged my staff with reducing administrative and bureaucratic burdens, so that survivors and communities receive assistance more quickly. Throughout the federal government, there are a number of programs that offer assistance to survivors. We are working with our partners to streamline and consolidate some of these activities to ensure survivors can better navigate our various programs. (Long 2018: 6)

While local concerns have reached national platforms, our study illustrates that little has been effectively done to alleviate the added suffering of bureaucratic recovery processes for survivors in North Carolina. Not only do federal recovery processes need streamlining and increased accessibility, state institutions also need to be better staffed, organized, and equipped to channel resources and assistance in ways that facilitate meaningful and rapid recovery. In such efforts, government agents responsible for making decisions about resources and spending would better serve constituents by understanding the ways that bureaucratic processes enact forms of everyday violence that can alter realities of time, space, safety, and well-being. For survivors whose lives have been completely altered or uprooted, the “alien logic and inflexible systems” of recovery, as Browne (2013) notes, piles on “new sources of exhaustion and frustration” and adds “insult to hardship, leaving people with the sense of having lost control of their lives and futures.” In these contexts, “cultural brokers,” or people adept at navigating cultural “gaps,” may prove useful in mitigating frustrations and improving relationships and communication between communities and the layers of institutions involved in preparation, relief, and recovery (FEMA 2019).

The slow pace of recovery additionally leaves little room for long-term planning and development that considers broader climate trends, livelihood security, and the reduction of vulnerability. As Heijmans (2004) argues, it is imperative to shift from a “disaster-cycle model” to “disaster risk-reduction framework”; this is especially salient considering emerging climate trends predicting that higher sea levels will make flooding more frequent in the Carolinas and strengthen storm surges causing them to travel farther inland (United States Global Change Research Program 2018). Over one billion dollars in state and federal funds has been spent on Hurricane Florence recovery alone (NCDPS 2019), and locals and officials are beginning to acknowledge the need to avoid not only deaths but also the costs of rebuilding (Boraks 2019). Disaster risk reduction in the context of frequent catastrophes and changing

climate trends, however, requires more than short-term coping strategies. It requires being attuned to local realities, relationships, and knowledge systems, understanding the systemic forces that create patterns of exposure and vulnerability, and rethinking conventional patterns of land-use and social and economic development, especially those that have prioritized the reduction of social services and the public sector (Oliver-Smith 2013, 2016).

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