

Inside how the Iowa National Guard is helping victims of Hurricane Helene

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Katie Kaplan



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DES MOINES, Iowa – The strength of Iowans is making a big difference for survivors of Hurricane Helene.

“The days are long,” said Staff Sergeant Jesse Ayala. “We show up. We get the helicopter ready, and by then, the loaders are already ready to go.”

Ayala is a Flight Engineer Instructor with Bravo Company in the Iowa Air National Guard. He has been deployed to North Carolina since last Monday, making up to three flights a day with his crew to transport supplies to hard-to-reach places in the mountains of North Carolina.

Each trip transports roughly 14,500 pounds of cargo. Working 13-hour days during deployment, the Iowa-based crew had transported roughly 100-thousand pounds of food, water, and supplies to places hit the hardest by the storm in less than four days. After assessing additional needs in the communities they land in, the crew was also able to dispatch a secondary shipment to some locations with specific needs, like diapers or chainsaws.

On Sept. 30, Governor Kim Reynolds authorized the deployment of an Iowa Army National Guard helicopter and crew, and a swift water rescue team, to help with response efforts. She dispatched a second Chinook helicopter and crew days later.

“You can actually see the small isolated communities and you only count one road,” Ayala told WHO-13’s Katie Kaplan. “That’s kind of when it really hits you kind of hard that there’s, you know, people that are truly stranded out there.”

With a birds-eye view, they can navigate a highway in the sky to a landing spot in the center of those cut-off communities.

“When we start moving out,” he described. “We can see the mountains in the distance. We can see the amount of air traffic that’s going in and out of that area. So that’s one thing to maneuver through. And once we actually get into the mountains, that’s when you really start to see the landslides.”

With civilian help, they leave the supplies behind and sometimes return to base with new cargo in the form of evacuees, people who were left stranded alone, or elderly nursing home residents whose facilities were left surrounded by water.

“Overall, the spirits are actually super high,” he said. “When we get to come out here and bring the best of the best, it feels really good.”

According to an Iowa National Guard spokesperson, the crews will be deployed until at least October 12.

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