



In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, I want to take a moment to reflect on the resilience and strength we have demonstrated as a university and as a community. This catastrophic event challenged us in ways we could not have imagined, yet it also revealed our collective spirit, our preparedness, and our ability to support each other during times of crisis.

As we continue our journey toward recovery, I would like to provide you with an update on some of the steps USC Upstate took—and continues to take—to ensure the safety and well-being of our students, faculty, staff, and the broader community.

How We Prepared and Responded

- **Campus Preparations:** Facilities management took critical steps to secure buildings and infrastructure before the storm hit.
 - We reinforced vulnerable structures, protected key utilities, and took precautions to minimize potential damage from flooding and high winds.
 - We had enough diesel fuel to power generators for three days. Sheryl Turner Watts and Fred Scott secured enough to allow longer coverage.
 - Given that students could not charge their devices to contact home, Adam Long and his team with Facilities established three power stations on campus.
- **Incident Management Plan:** The USC Upstate Incident Management Team coordinated and led effective emergency preparedness planning and execution of the University Incident Management Plan. The plan specifically addresses incidents such as tropical storms, hurricanes, and electrical outages. In this crisis:
 - Sheryl Turner Watts immediately reached out to me and initiated activities to respond.
 - The day after the storm, Fred Scott and the Facilities and maintenance team were on campus cleaning debris, removing fallen trees, and establishing emergency routes for emergency vehicles and power trucks.
 - With Chloe Jones and Tierney Bates, we assessed the safety of our students, determined the number of students remaining on campus, triaged our support for them, and ensured they had food and water.
- **Timely Communication:** Our priority was to keep everyone informed.
 - Through our emergency alert system we sent regular updates to ensure that students, faculty, and staff had the latest information about evacuation orders, safety protocols, and resources available. SpartAlert was an effective tool for communicating with the campus community when email and phone services were unavailable.

- Terry Manning served as our chief communication point, supported by Emily Gillespie. Kesha Williams and senior members of the communication team did not have access to electricity, cell phone services, or the ability to leave their homes.
- We communicated to the campus and established immediate responses, following the legal requirement to close campus when the county closed.
- Pamela Steinke coordinated with faculty to extend grace to students as they readjusted to campus life after the hurricane, significantly reducing the anxiety many students were feeling.
- **Evacuation and Shelter Coordination:** On day one, we had 800 students in residence halls without power or hot meals. On day two, about 400 students who could safely leave did so, allowing us to focus support on those remaining.
 - Jim Shecter and the Sodexo team (without power) prepared cold sandwiches. On day two they brought portable grills and prepared a hot meal. Sodexo also cooked hot meals at Limestone University and transported them to campus.
 - Robbie Davis spearheaded the initiative to set up a County Medical Shelter in Hodge for residents needing electricity to power their oxygen tanks and other medical devices.

Rebuilding

Now, as we begin the rebuilding process, we remain committed to restoring our campus and community to full strength. Repairs are already underway, and our Facilities team is working to ensure that all campus operations are fully functional. We are also continuing to assess individual needs among our students and staff and providing resources for those still facing the effects of the storm.

At the same time, we are extending our support beyond the boundaries of our campus. Our thoughts are with our neighbors, specifically those in and around Asheville, where the storm caused devastating flooding and landslides. Parts of the city, including areas around Chimney Rock, experienced severe damage, leaving homes and businesses destroyed. We are working with local agencies and organizations to provide assistance. Also, our thoughts are with all those who are currently being impacted by Hurricane Milton.

Looking Ahead

The challenges posed by Hurricane Helene have underscored the importance of preparedness, resilience, and community support. As we move forward, we will continue to strengthen our emergency response plans—adding radios to our communications plan, for example, and having more diesel fuel on hand—and build more robust systems to better protect and serve our university and the broader region.

I am deeply grateful to our staff, first responders, and volunteers who put in countless hours to ensure our community remained safe. And while no level of preparation can fully prevent the disruption caused by a storm of this magnitude, I believe we successfully mitigated many of the potential risks.

In closing, I want to thank each and every one of you—students, faculty, staff, families, alumni, volunteers, and local community members—for your strength and solidarity during this difficult

time. There are so many people I haven't been able to mention by name here, but whose good works made an incredible difference. Whether you volunteered your time, contributed to the relief fund, or provided support to those nearby, your deeds truly reflect the essence of the USC Upstate community.

Together, we will emerge from this stronger than before. Thank you for your patience, your dedication, and your steadfast commitment to rebuilding our campus and community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Bennie L. Harris". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "B" and a prominent flourish at the end.

Dr. Bennie L. Harris
Chancellor