

NC has spent \$0 of \$200 million grant to rebuild homes damaged by Hurricane Matthew, report says

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FAIR BLUFF, NC (WBTV) -

A report released by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development in late March shows North Carolina has yet to spend any of \$236 million grant intended to help fund recovery efforts from Hurricane Matthew.

The state was awarded the community development block grant for disaster recovery, known as CDBG-DR, last fall.

Both North Carolina and South Carolina received CDBG-DR funding at the same time in the wake of Hurricane Matthew, which devastated communities in rural, eastern portions of both states.

Last fall, WBTV traveled the path of Hurricane Matthew to look at how communities were recovering one year after the storm.

Our report found communities in South Carolina at least six months ahead of similarly situated towns in North Carolina in recovery efforts.

In North Carolina, where state leaders decided to award CDBG-DR funds to counties that would, in turn, spend the money to help people repair or replace their houses, the process of accepting applications for assistance had yet to begin.

But in South Carolina, state disaster recovery leaders anticipated starting construction on the first homes damaged by Hurricane Matthew in early October.

Recovery is moving quickly in SC

Now, roughly seven months later, at least 52 families have moved into new or repaired homes in South Carolina while families impacted by Hurricane Matthew in North Carolina have yet to see any help.

“South Carolina is moving faster than a lot of other people,” JR Sanderson, director of the South Carolina Disaster Recovery Office, said. “Having said that, it’s still not fast enough for the citizen. The citizen wants to be back in their home tomorrow and my team’s job is to make that happen as fast as we possibly can.”

To help his team remember what their end goal is – putting families back in safe, sanitary and secure homes as quickly as possible – Sanderson posts a picture of each finished home on the walls of the disaster recovery office.

“Once of the things I want the team to do—and everyone who walks in this office is—to see this is the outcome of the public tax dollar. Every time we complete a home, we put a photograph up on the wall. This will eventually fill up with all 1,350 homes we are intending on doing for Hurricane Matthew,” Sanderson said.

Sanderson said he hopes his team will build at least 500 homes for families impacted by Hurricane Matthew by the end of 2018.

One reason Sanderson said he has the ability to move so quickly is because he has strong support from elected leaders in the state.

“We have real good political support, real good top cover from the Department of Commerce,” Sanderson said. “Certainly the governor saying ‘we need to recover South Carolina’ helps beat the bureaucracy in some ways.”

The fast pace of the work in South Carolina meant that Betty Smith could move into a new home after her trailer in Mullins, SC was damaged by wind and rain brought by Hurricane Matthew.

“I’m telling you, it’s very rough because you might not have people that really want you to stay with them and I didn’t have the funds to get a hotel, so it was really awful,” Smith said. “That was the worst feeling I ever had. Every day I prayed to God, please, Lord, get me back in my home.”

Now, the front yard is dotted with flowering bushes and young trees that she recently planted in an effort to restore her home back to the way it was before the storm.

Slow recovery frustrates residents in one NC town

The scenery looks totally different just a 30-minute drive north of Smith’s home to the town of Fair Bluff, NC.

Fair Bluff was hit hard by flood waters that spilled over the banks of the Lumber River, which meanders parallel to the town's business district along Main Street and continues past a row of once stately homes.

Now, 18 months after the storm, the storefronts on Main Street remain boarded up and the homes across from the river still sit empty.

It's frustrating for residents like Ray Lundy, who talked with WBTV both during our first visit in September and again this week as we went back to see if any progress had been made.

"Fair Bluff is exactly like it was in '16 when Hurricane Matthew struck," Lundy said. "Nothing has changed except the volume of mold."

Lundy said the only recovery efforts he's seen in the town is a project to replace sewer lines that were damaged in the storm and plans to re-build the fire department. But, he said, nothing has been done to replace the homes destroyed by the hurricane.

"If you get around and drive some of these back streets, it's just empty houses," he said.

North Carolina leaders refuse to answer questions

A week before this story was to air on TV and be published online, WBTV asked both the North Carolina Governor's Office and the North Carolina Office of Emergency Management for an on-camera interview so we could ask a state leader about the slow pace of recovery.

Julia Jarema, a spokeswoman for NCEM first said she was checking a schedule to possibly arrange such an interview but ultimately declined.

Instead, Jarema sent an email with talking points not responsive to any of WBTV's questions but did say the state expects "the first participants to receive assistance next month."

Neither Jarema nor a spokesman for Governor Roy Cooper's office responded to a follow-up inquiry specifically asking about why the state had yet to spend any of the \$236 million CDBG-DR grant money.

<http://www.wbvtv.com/story/37946199/nc-has-spent-0-of-200-million-grant-to-rebuild-homes-damaged-by-hurricane-matthew-report-says>