



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: Tuesday, April 7, 2026.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. Contact [Gage Harter](#) with any questions.

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Montgomery County

Program Title: Coordinated Crisis Response: Montgomery County's Hurricane Helene Boil Water Advisory Management

Program Category: Health & Human Services

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Angela M. Hill

Title: County Administrator

Signature: 

## **VACo Award Submission | Montgomery County**

### **Coordinated Crisis Response: Montgomery County's Hurricane Helene Boil Water Advisory Management**

#### **Award Category: Risk and Emergency Management**

Montgomery County faced a significant public health and communication challenge following Hurricane Helene in September 2024, when severe sediment in the New River compromised regional water treatment operations. A boil water advisory was issued affecting approximately 100,000 citizens, including the Towns of Blacksburg and Christiansburg, Virginia Tech, hospitals, and K–12 schools. Initially expected to last only a few days, the advisory extended to 12 days and required a phased lifting process.

In response, Montgomery County rapidly established a multi-agency Water Task Force to coordinate operations and communication across jurisdictions. The Task Force included local governments, state agencies, healthcare providers, utilities, and public information officers, operating under a unified framework with twice-daily briefings and continuous coordination.

The County implemented a unified communications strategy to ensure consistent messaging. Fourteen joint public updates, press conferences, and digital alerts provided timely information. An address-based GIS map allowed citizens to determine their advisory status in real time, reducing confusion during the phased lifting process. Support through VA211 helped manage public inquiries. This coordinated effort protected public health, minimized misinformation, and maintained public trust.

## **Problem, Challenge, or Situation**

On September 30, 2024, Montgomery County's water system was impacted by severe weather associated with Hurricane Helene. Excessive sediment in the New River disrupted treatment operations at the New River Valley Regional Water Authority, prompting the Virginia Department of Health to issue a boil water advisory.

The advisory affected approximately 100,000 citizens across Montgomery County, including the Towns of Blacksburg and Christiansburg, Virginia Tech, hospitals, and K-12 schools. What initially appeared to be a short-term disruption extended into a 12-day event requiring a phased lifting process based on water system recovery.

The situation presented multiple challenges. First, the County needed to manage a significant public health risk while ensuring continuity of essential services. Second, officials had to communicate evolving and sometimes uncertain information to a large and diverse population. Finally, the phased lifting of the advisory created additional complexity, as different areas regained safe water access at different times.

This required not only operational coordination across multiple agencies and jurisdictions, but also a highly effective communication strategy to maintain public trust, reduce confusion, and ensure compliance with safety guidance.

## **Program Implementation**

Montgomery County initiated its emergency response within hours of notification. By the afternoon of September 30, a multi-agency Water Task Force had been established,

bringing together representatives from local governments, state agencies, public utilities, healthcare systems, educational institutions, and emergency management.

The Task Force implemented a structured coordination model centered on twice-daily briefings and continuous communication. This framework ensured real-time information sharing, rapid decision-making, and alignment across all partners. As the advisory extended beyond initial expectations, the Task Force adapted its strategy to manage both operational demands and the complexity of a phased lifting process.

A unified communications approach became a cornerstone of the response. Fourteen coordinated public updates were issued across jurisdictions through social media, websites, and text alert systems. Messaging focused on transparency, providing clear updates on water testing, timelines, and safety requirements.

To further support public understanding, Montgomery County deployed several communication tools. Press conferences connected media and the public directly with subject matter experts, helping address concerns and dispel misinformation. GIS staff developed an interactive, address-based map that allowed citizens to check the status of the advisory at their specific location—an essential innovation during phased lifting.

To manage increased call volume, the County partnered with VA211 to provide additional public assistance, ensuring citizens had access to accurate, real-time information.

### **Innovation, Collaboration, and Model for Other Localities**

Montgomery County's response demonstrates a strong integration of innovation, collaboration, and replicable practices.

Innovation was evident in the development of an interactive GIS map that translated complex, location-based data into an accessible, user-friendly tool. This approach empowered citizens with real-time information and significantly reduced confusion during phased lifting.

Collaboration was central to the program's success. The Water Task Force unified local governments, state agencies, utilities, healthcare providers, and educational institutions under a shared operational framework. Existing relationships—strengthened through prior emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic—enabled rapid coordination and trust among partners.

**Model for Other Localities:** The structured Task Force approach, combined with unified communications and scalable digital tools, provides a replicable model for managing complex, multi-jurisdictional emergencies. The emphasis on transparency, consistency, and adaptability offers valuable lessons for other communities facing similar public health or infrastructure challenges.

### **Financing and Staffing**

The response was carried out primarily using existing personnel, systems, and resources. Staff from Montgomery County and partner organizations contributed as part of their operational responsibilities, minimizing the need for additional funding.

Key functions—including emergency coordination, public communication, GIS mapping, and media engagement—were executed using in-house expertise and

established tools. The interactive GIS map was developed internally, eliminating the need for external contracts.

Support from partner organizations, including VA211, expanded service capacity at no cost. This approach highlights the effectiveness of preparedness, interagency collaboration, and resource sharing in managing complex emergencies without significant new expenditures.

## **Results**

Montgomery County's coordinated response successfully protected public health and maintained community stability during a 12-day emergency affecting approximately 100,000 citizens.

The Water Task Force enabled efficient decision-making and ensured a unified regional response. Consistent and transparent communication—delivered through coordinated updates, press conferences and digital tools—helped reduce confusion and reinforced public trust.

The interactive GIS map proved especially impactful, allowing citizens to quickly determine their advisory status during phased lifting. This innovation reduced misinformation, lowered call volume, and improved overall public understanding.

The response also effectively addressed misinformation by providing direct access to health experts, ensuring accurate information reached the public and alleviating concerns about water safety. Ultimately, the safe and orderly lifting of the advisory demonstrated the

County's ability to adapt to evolving conditions, manage risk, and maintain confidence across the community.

### Montgomery County Overview:

- Montgomery County is comprised of two large towns (Blacksburg and Christiansburg) and a major university (Virginia Tech).
- Population: approximately 100,000
- Size: 386 Miles

### Hurricane Helene Overall Montgomery County Timeline:

- **September 30 (Monday):** at approximately 9:20 a.m., we were notified that the water supply at the New River Valley Regional Water Authority was impaired, which resulted in VDH advising the Authority to issue a Boil Water Notice.
  - **September 30 (afternoon):** VDEM arrived
  - **October 1:** a coalition of moms of Virginia Tech students from the 703 area code contacted the County, expressing great concern of the safety of their children.
  - **October 2:** we realized it would be several days before the boil water notice could be lifted.
  - **October 3:** we began communicating with citizens that they should expect to boil their water prior to consumption or cooking until October 13.
  - **October 5 (Saturday):** Virginia Tech representatives contacted the Governor's Office, which resulted in the Governor's Office expressing a desire to send help to our locality.
  - **October 9:** the planned grand opening of the new NRV Regional Water Authority Plant – moved to **October 23**.
    - **Note:** every two years, Montgomery County partners with the Town of Christiansburg for a Montgomery County-Christiansburg Citizens Academy. The Citizens Academy was scheduled to tour the new NRV Regional Water Authority facility on **October 16**. Needless to say, the tour did not take place. Staff had to quickly pivot and find a new meeting location for week 7 of the 8-week academy.
  - **October 11:** We were able to lift boil water notice for everyone in Montgomery County.
  - **October 18:** FEMA established a Disaster Recovery Center in the Montgomery County Government Center.
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## Boil Water Notice:

### *Key Things To Note:*

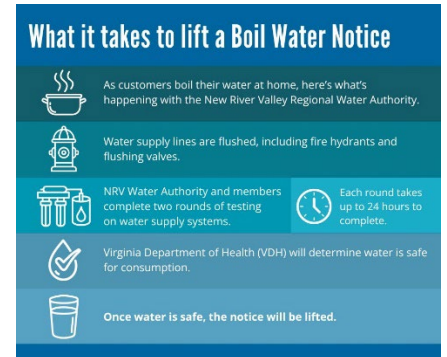
- Again, two large towns and a major university are part of Montgomery County.
- One positive thing about Montgomery County is the fact that we have strong regional relationships, which were strengthened during the pandemic.
- Because of this, we were quickly able to identify who needed to be involved in the response to this local water crisis.
- This led to a collaborative, strategic, and effective response whereby the entities involved presented a united front in our community.

### *The Facts:*

- On September 30, a boil water notice was issued and it impacted:
  - Montgomery County Public Service Authority customers
  - Town of Blacksburg
  - Virginia Tech
  - Town of Christiansburg
  - This included hospitals, schools, etc.
- By 4 p.m., on September 30, a large response team had gathered to include:
  1. Local Health District Representatives
  2. Virginia Department of Health
  3. Office of Drinking Water
  4. Montgomery County PSA
  5. Town of Christiansburg Utility Partners
  6. VDEM
  7. Town of Blacksburg Utility Partners
  8. Me and my counterparts at the towns
  9. Virginia Tech representatives
  10. Hospitals
  11. First Responders
  12. PIOs from the County, Towns and University
- On September 30, we all thought the boil water notice would be lifted in a few days.
- Still, the Water Task Force formed on September 30, established a schedule for meeting twice daily in person and/or by Zoom – 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., beginning October 1.
- While we initially thought the boil water notice would only last a few days, by October 2, we all realized the boil water notice would be in place for several days based on the information provided by VDH Office of Drinking Water.
- In addition to the twice daily meetings, there were several other calls, text threads and even Zooms that took place in the two weeks during the boil water notice with various subgroups as well. In short, we all worked throughout the day, evening and even weekend to help get the boil water notice lifted for our community.

## Boil Water Notice Continued:

- Communications:
  - *Note: Originally, we thought we could lift the boil water notice for everyone at one time, but VDH informed us that we need to lift in a phased approach due to the fact that the water tanks and lines nearest the NRV Regional Water Authority would be safe to consume sooner than others.*
  - **Social Media/Web/Text Messages:**
    - In total, there were 14 collaborative messages from the 5 main entities involved: the County, Towns, NRV Regional Water Authority and Virginia Tech
    - The messages provided transparent information about the process that had to take place in order to lift the boil water notice.
    - The messages also communicated the water test results and provided brief context about what the published test results were.
      - A = Absence of Bacteria; B = Presence of Bacteria
    - We texted citizens and specifically County PSA customers with updates.
    - As we knew we were approaching potential lifting of the boil water notice, we began publishing tentative schedules for when each entity might have their boil water notice lifted.
    - Link to news item updates:  
<https://montva.com/homepage/2024/09/30/new-river-valley-regional-water-authority-issues-boil-water-notice>
  - **Press Conferences:**
    - My staff organized and facilitated 3 press conferences. During the press conferences, the director of the NRV Regional Water Authority gave updates, along with representatives from VDH.
      - On 1 of the 3 press conferences, the Director of the New River Health District, Dr. Noelle Bissell, also provided an update to help address rumors that people had been getting sick from the water. *(Fact: there was no evidence of sickness in our community related to the water.)*
    - During the press conferences (using Zoom Webinar feature), one of my staff members served as a facilitator. Updates were provided and then the facilitator fed questions to the experts from the local media participants.
    - This allowed those who were working on solving the problem – like the NRV Regional Water Authority Director – to answer media questions at specific times vs. fielding them independently and individually.



### Boil Water Notice Continued:






- Communications Continued:
  - *Interactive Map:*
    - Beginning on October 7, we were able to lift the boil water notice for some areas, but not all. In order to help mitigate confusion, my GIS staff built an interactive map and worked with GIS staff from the towns of Blacksburg and Christiansburg to upload addresses of impacted water customers.
    - Citizens could enter their address using the interactive map and receive a message that either the boil water notice was lifted at their address (blue message) or it was still in effect (red message).
  - *VA211:*
    - On October 7, we contacted VA211 to ask if they could help with phone calls related to whether the boil water notice was still in effect at someone's address.
    - By October 8, VA211 was in place to help with phone calls.

### Employee Response:

- County employees helped clean up the area where their neighbors lost their homes due to the flooding.
- Employees donated items to the flood victims.
- Murjan (pronounced merge on) N. Hammad in our Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department was deployed to North Carolina by the Federal Department of Health and Human Services as part of a Disaster Medical Assistance Team for two weeks.
  - His team was responsible for setting up an ER decompression site in Eastern North Carolina to serve as an extension of an existing medical facility.
- The Montgomery County Sheriff's Office partnered with Christiansburg Police Department, Christiansburg Fire Department, and Blacksburg Police Department to collect supplies for Hurricane Helene victims. On October 4, 2024, volunteers from Christiansburg and Montgomery County worked to fill two trailers with donations at Kroger and Walmart.
  - On October 7, five agencies caravanned with the donations to the Washington County Sheriff's Office in Abingdon to deliver the donations. It took 15 individual volunteers to unload the donations so generously given by Montgomery County citizens to help relief efforts in and around Washington County.

**Infographic developed by my team for use when communicating with citizens:**

## What it takes to lift a Boil Water Notice

-  As customers boil their water at home, here's what's happening with the New River Valley Regional Water Authority.
-  Water supply lines are flushed, including fire hydrants and flushing valves.
-  NRV Water Authority and members complete two rounds of testing on water supply systems.
-  Each round takes up to 24 hours to complete.
-  Virginia Department of Health (VDH) will determine water is safe for consumption.
-  Once water is safe, the notice will be lifted.

**Task Force Meeting Agenda (8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. daily + 3 p.m. on weekends):**

*Met in-person and via Zoom*

- Introductions
- NRV Regional Water Authority Update
- Locality Status Reports
  - Blacksburg
  - Christiansburg
  - Montgomery
- Virginia Tech Status Report
- Hospital Status Report
  - LewisGale Montgomery
  - Carillion New River Valley
- Public Information Report
- Additional Updates