



WNC Citizens for Equality

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LOCAL CITIZENS FILE TITLE VI COMPLAINT AFTER BUNCOMBE COUNTY LEADEERS PRIORITIZE HELENE RECOVERY BY RACE

(Asheville, NC) On January 22, 2025, a local citizen organization, WNC Citizens for Equality, filed a Title VI complaint with the U.S. Department of the Treasury after Buncombe County government inserted racial preferences in distributing Hurricane Helene relief funds. The County’s racial preferencing is a direct violation of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act as well as the County’s own anti-discrimination policy¹.

On September 27, 2024, Buncombe County suffered a direct hit from Hurricane Helene which, together with a stalled front, dumped an unprecedented 14 inches of rain on the city in less than 72 hours. The resulting flooding caused devastation along the Swannanoa and French Broad Rivers, as well as extensive landslides and downed trees. Entire store fronts and businesses were washed away, leaving residents who relied on these businesses for income without a livelihood. Four months into the recovery, many businesses still remained closed, and debris continues to line the streets where businesses once thrived.

In an effort to assist small business owners with their recovery, Buncombe County leaders reallocated almost \$1.6 million in American Rescue Plan (ARPA) funds toward a newly created grant program known as the “Helene Relief: Small Business Grant Program”. The County then partnered with Mountain Bizworks, a local nonprofit, to administer the grant program within the county. Applicants could receive up to \$25,000 in grant money to help cover losses incurred from the storm.

However, in what should have been an initiative that brought people together, Buncombe County leaders elected to inject racial discrimination into the hurricane relief program. Buncombe County announced that it would prioritize “BIPOC” (nonwhite) owned businesses over white-owned businesses for funding, rather than allow applicants to compete simply on need.

¹ <https://www.buncombecounty.org/i-want-to/contact/file-discrimination-complaint.aspx#:~:text=The%20nondiscrimination%20ordinance%20defines%20discrimination,status%2C%20religious%20belief%20or%20non%2D>

Buncombe County Commissioners (all members of the Democrat party) have made “social justice” a central priority of government spending in recent years, spending millions on reparations for black residents and other racial equity programs. Buncombe County’s policies often track those of the City of Asheville, the liberal population base in the heart of the western North Carolina county.

In the Helene Relief Small Business Grant Program, the County made clear that white business owners would be given lower priority for relief funding than their nonwhite counterparts. Mountain Bizworks, who was charged with selecting recipients of relief funds, also publicly announced that they would prioritize nonwhite business owners over white applicants in “scoring” applications.

Since announcing the relief program, the County and Mountain Bizworks appear to have administered the relief program with racial preferences, just as they promised to do. In a January 7, 2025 update on the program, the County and Mountain Bizworks announced that they had awarded 137 grants averaging \$11,441 in size. Over 28% of those grants went to nonwhite applicants, while the nonwhite population of Buncombe County is less than 12%. Neither entity has stated the individual amounts of the grants to specific recipients publicly.

“People have already been devastated by Helene”, says WNC Citizens for Equality President Dr. Carl Mumpower. “To have the County then tell storm victims that they now cannot receive equal treatment for help due to their skin color is just adding insult to injury. We should be coming together as a community, but Buncombe County leaders feel it’s more important to divide us by race. It’s appalling that they took this opportunity, at this point when people are so desperate for help, to make the color of a person’s skin a priority in deciding who receives help. Buncombe County leaders should be ashamed of themselves”.

Attorney Ruth Smith, who represents individuals facing illegal racial discrimination, stated that the County was jeopardizing the entire \$1.6 million in federal funds by its illegal acts. “The County’s actions are a clear violation of Title VI, which forbids entities from using federal funds in any manner that discriminates based on race. The penalty here could be stiff: Buncombe County could be required to reimburse to the federal government the entire \$1.6 million, and that’s at a time when the County is broke. They are projecting a \$20 million budget shortfall and they are already cutting services and staffing. It’s beyond stupid to risk what money they do have to push an illegal discrimination agenda.”

The complaint to the U.S. Department of the Treasury is against both Buncombe County and Mountain Bizworks. Title VI applies to any entity receiving federal funding, including private entities.

“I am confident that the Treasury Department will take steps to bring Buncombe County into compliance with anti-discrimination laws,” says Dr. Mumpower. “Our citizens deserve to be treated equally, regardless of race, and I am optimistic that Buncombe County’s administration will agree to do the right thing and stop judging its citizens by skin color.”