

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Workers Who Rebuilt Western North Carolina Speak Spanish

Our Friends · Tuesday, August 4th, 2026

Spanish-speaking construction workers cleared the debris Hurricane Helene left across Western North Carolina in September 2024.

They gutted flood-soaked buildings in Asheville's River Arts District and repaired homes throughout the mountain counties, alongside local crews and laborers brought in from other states.

HUD allocated the state \$1.4 billion in disaster-recovery funding, and the N.C. Department of Commerce counted **more than 7,000 housing applications** by Dec. 31 in its 2025 Helene recovery summary. The state's recovery reports offer no comparable count of the workforce.

DCReport documented in July that Spanish speakers struggled to get aid and storm information in their own language. That fits a wider national pattern: recovery programs track money and finished projects more closely than the people hired to do the work.

Who actually rebuilt the mountain counties?

Enlace Latino NC described the Asheville cleanup as work that required Latino labor. Its reporter found about 10 workers from Winston-Salem gutting a flooded building in the River Arts District.

When she approached them, a man walked over and asked her to leave, saying he paid their salaries. "This is a free country, but they're working for me," he said.

Einar Rojas came from Chicago, recruited by a contractor who organizes disaster crews, the same route that had taken him to Florida after Hurricane Ian. He had been in Asheville almost two weeks, working more than 10 hours a day, seven days a week.

Rojas said roughly 100 Venezuelan workers in his group stayed in a hotel the contracting company paid for, a company the outlet could not identify. Buncombe County said contractors were responsible for the safety and treatment of those workers, and that it had no data on how many temporary workers arrived.

How dangerous is this work?

Nationally, Hispanic or Latino workers died at a rate of **4.3 per 100,000 full-time-equivalent workers** in 2024, against 3.3 for all workers, and 68.5% of those deaths involved workers born

outside the United States. By the **National Safety Council's count**, 2024 marked the eighth straight year of Hispanic or Latino workers recording the highest death rate of any group.

The state picture moves year to year. N.C. recorded **196 workplace deaths in 2024**, up 10.7% from 177 the year before, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in March. Latino worker deaths fell from 41 to 30 over that year, and construction deaths dropped from 43 to 36, still the most of any private industry in the state.

A **study of N.C. fatalities from 1992 through 2017** found Hispanic men died on the job at 2.11 times the rate of white men. Hispanic workers logged 32% of their worker-years in construction but 58% of their fatalities there.

Pay disappears too. Among 171 day laborers surveyed in Louisiana after Hurricane Ida, **half reported wage theft**, and 91% of them said it happened during the previous two months of recovery work.

Does safety training reach Spanish-speaking construction workers?

Employers must **provide safety training** in a language and vocabulary workers can understand, OSHA policy states. The agency tells its own inspectors to look past the paperwork, because a company may hold training records for employees who never understood what the training covered.

That gap matters on disaster sites, where crews enter flood-damaged buildings, pull apart unstable debris and work around electrical hazards. Rojas said his Asheville crew used helmets, gloves, masks and boots. Equipment is not instruction. In that same Louisiana survey, only 15% of workers said they had received any training at all for the sites they were entering.

Contractor chains blur that responsibility further. A recruiter assembles the crew, a subcontractor assigns the task and a supervisor gives directions out loud at the site. The state's Helene recovery reports do not state what safety instruction those crews received, who gave it or in what language.

What happens when a rebuild worker gets hurt?

Establishing who the employer was comes first. A rebuild crew can sit under a general contractor, a subcontractor, a labor recruiter and a crew leader at once. Whoever directs the work may call a worker an independent contractor, though the N.C. Industrial Commission can look past that label to ask who controlled the job.

Most N.C. businesses with three or more employees must carry workers' compensation insurance. An injured worker generally faces two deadlines: written notice to the employer within 30 days, then a Form 18 claim filed with the commission within two years. The commission warns that an employer's own accident report **does not satisfy the second**, so a worker who assumes the boss handled it can lose the claim.

An uninsured subcontractor is not the end of the inquiry. State law can make a principal contractor liable when a subcontractor lacks required coverage. **N.C. courts have held** that immigration status does not automatically erase eligibility. A separate claim may exist when another company or a defective product caused the injury.

A Spanish-language guide to [how North Carolina handles on-the-job injury claims](#), walks through the same sequence, from first report to filing deadline.

Who is supposed to inspect the rebuild?

N.C. handles most construction inspections within the state. Under an [OSHA-approved State Plan](#), the N.C. Occupational Safety and Health Division has authority over most private workplaces, so the inspectors who reach a Buncombe County job site work for the state.

Federal money still shapes that capacity. For fiscal 2026 the Labor Department asked Congress to cut 223 OSHA positions and eliminate the \$12.8 million Susan Harwood Training Grant Program, which trains workers on workplace hazards, calling the grants “wasteful and unnecessary.” Congress refused. It funded Harwood in full and raised state-plan grants to \$120 million, though OSHA staffing still fell to 1,639 positions from 1,810.

The request is back. For [fiscal 2027](#) the department again proposes eliminating Harwood, cuts state-plan grants by \$4.8 million and projects 36,323 state-program inspections nationwide, down from 38,642 for fiscal 2026.

The state’s recovery reporting does not show how many Helene-related inspections N.C. OSH conducted, what violations inspectors found or how many followed an injury complaint.

What would actually change the pattern?

Some of this needs no new law. Employers already owe training in a language each worker understands, and no Helene recovery report shows whether that happened. State-funded rebuild contracts could require naming subcontractors, labor recruiters and insurance carriers. N.C. OSH could publish Helene-related inspections, violations and injury complaints as a set.

Reporting channels matter as much as rules. After Ida, 96% of surveyed day laborers could not name a single organization that would help them file a wage claim. Community groups reach workers that agency notices miss, without carrying the legal duty that sits with employers and inspectors.

Major disasters create a workforce after the emergency crews leave. Those crews move from storm to storm, as Rojas did from Florida to N.C., while recovery programs count dollars and finished homes.

The people who cleared the mud remain outside that record, in N.C. and in every state that rebuilds, and leaving them there is a choice public agencies can reverse.

Photo: Franklin Peña Gutierrez via Pexels

[CLICK HERE TO DONATE IN SUPPORT OF OUR NONPROFIT COVERAGE OF ARTS AND CULTURE](#)

This entry was posted on Tuesday, August 4th, 2026 at 1:58 pm and is filed under [Check This Out](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.