

WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA HURRICANE HELENE BUSINESS FEEDBACK SURVEY

July 2026

Insights from Respondents to a Regional Business Survey Following Hurricane Helene
Data Collected Spring 2026
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RIVERBIRDRESEARCH

A DIVISION OF THE ASHEVILLE AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the third and final Business Feedback Survey conducted approximately one and a half years after Hurricane Helene. The survey received 284 completed responses from businesses and organizations across Western North Carolina and was conducted from late April through mid-June 2026. As with the previous two surveys, the findings reflect the experiences of participating respondents at a specific point in time and should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all businesses in the region.

Key findings include:

- **66%** of respondents reported their business was not at risk of closure over the next six months, similar to the second survey respondent pool.
- **32%** reported operating below break-even (at a loss), while **58%** reported operating at or above break-even.
- **76%** estimated some level of revenue loss related to Hurricane Helene.
- **54%** reported needing support to stabilize or fully recover from the storm's impacts. Financial assistance and increased customer demand remained the most frequently identified needs across all three surveys.
- **19%** reported unresolved property damage, and while repair and rebuilding needs were still present, they were identified less frequently than in previous surveys.
- **54%** reported no change in staffing levels compared to before Hurricane Helene, although **34%** reported lower staff numbers.

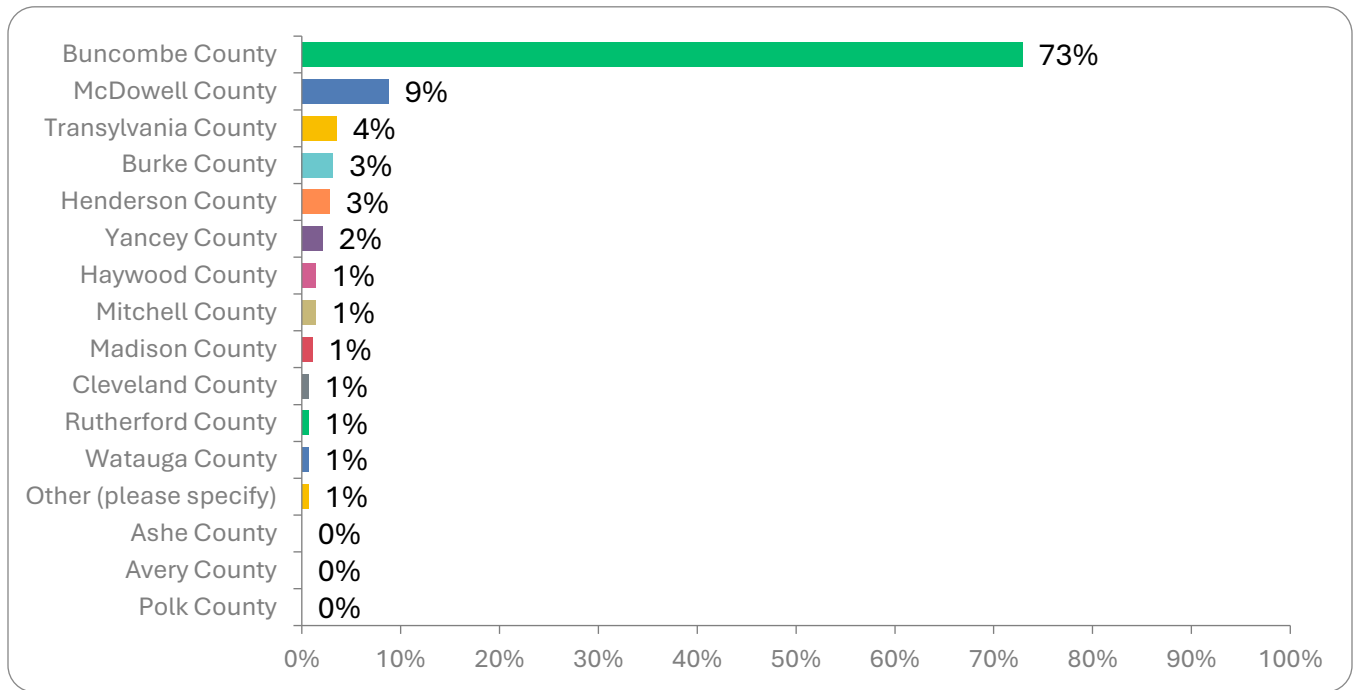
Overall, the findings suggest varied stages of recovery among participating businesses, with many showing signs of stabilization while others face financial and operational challenges. Recovery challenges appeared especially evident among respondents in tourism- and hospitality-related industries, including Arts and Entertainment, Accommodations, and Restaurants.

As the final survey in this series, these findings provide additional context to support continued engagement with businesses, regional partners, and decision-makers as recovery efforts evolve.

Survey Questions with Brief Overview

Q1. What county is your business located in? Select the county where the majority of activity is based.

Completed responses: 284



Out of 284 completed responses, 73% represented organizations located in Buncombe County, down slightly from 75% in the second survey (approximately one year after Hurricane Helene) but higher than 55% in the first survey (at approximately six months). McDowell County followed at 9%. The Asheville Metropolitan Statistical Area (Buncombe, Henderson, and Madison counties) made up 77% of responses. Ashe, Avery, and Polk counties were not represented in this survey.

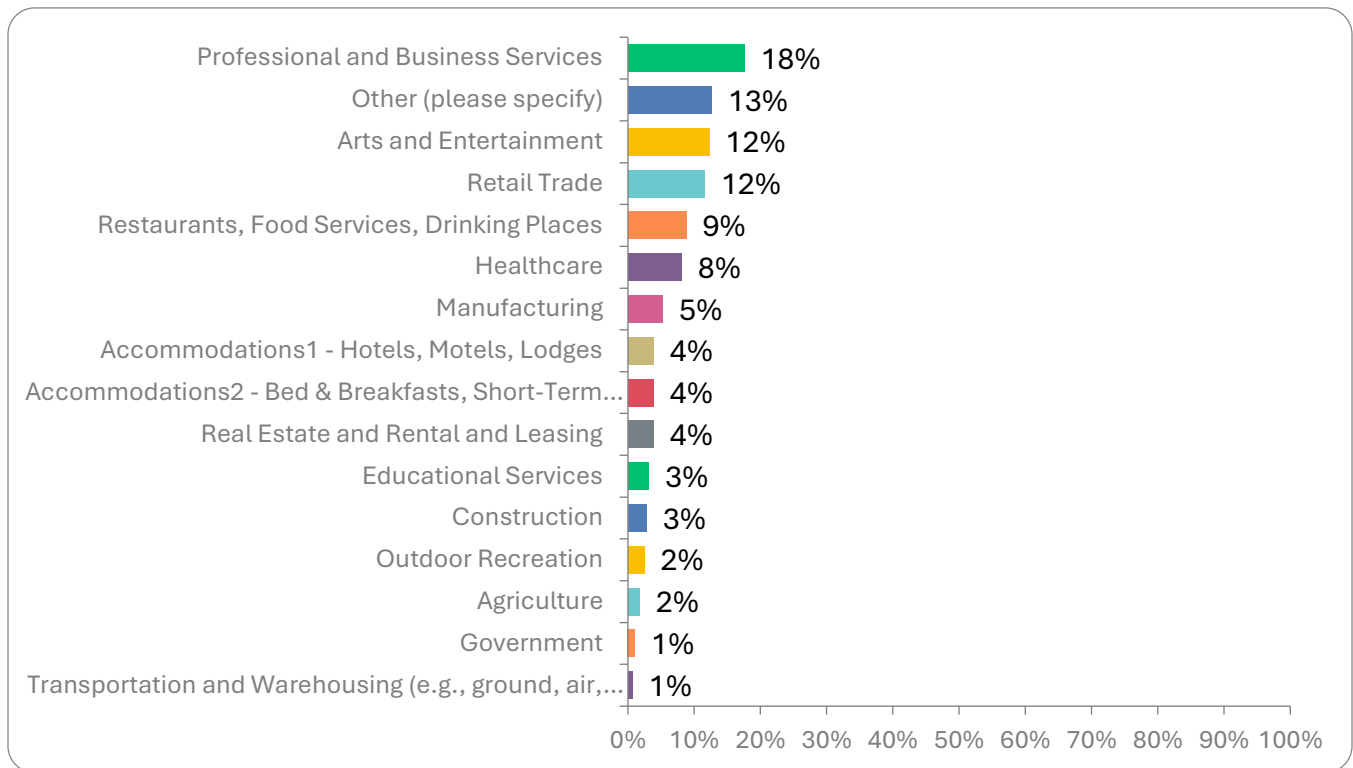
Q2. What city, town, or unincorporated area is your business located in?

Completed responses: 284

Among respondents, 59% reported Asheville as their business location. Following Asheville were Arden, Brevard, Morganton, and Weaverville, each representing 4% of responses.

Q3. Which industry best describes your business or organization?

Completed responses: 284



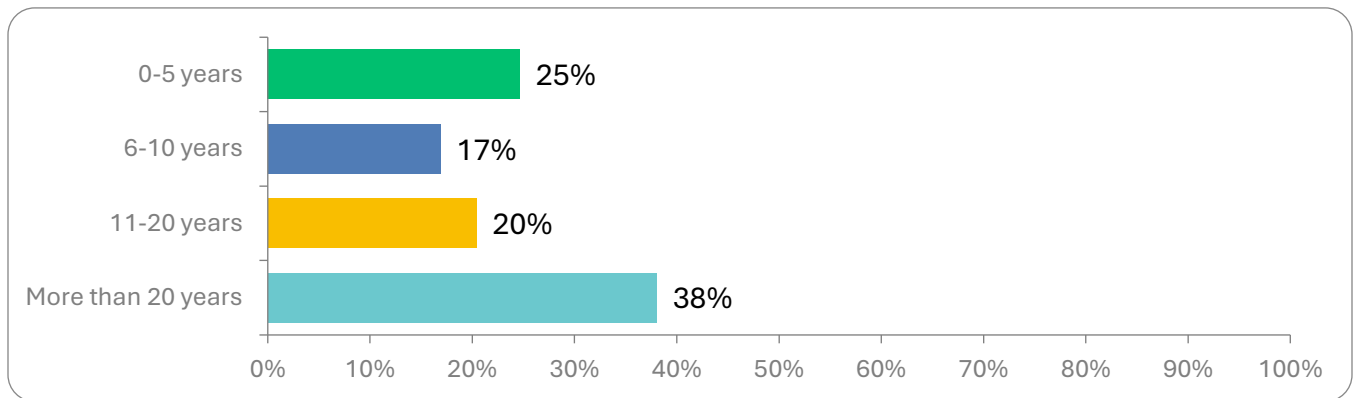
Excluding “Other”, the top five industries represented 59% of responses:

- Professional and Business Services (18%)
- Arts and Entertainment (12%)
- Retail Trade (12%)
- Restaurants, Food Services, Drinking Places (9%)
- Healthcare (8%)

The Leisure and Hospitality sector includes Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation, as well as Accommodation and Food Services. Combined, these categories represented 31% of respondents, or nearly one in three.

Q4. How long has your business been in operation?

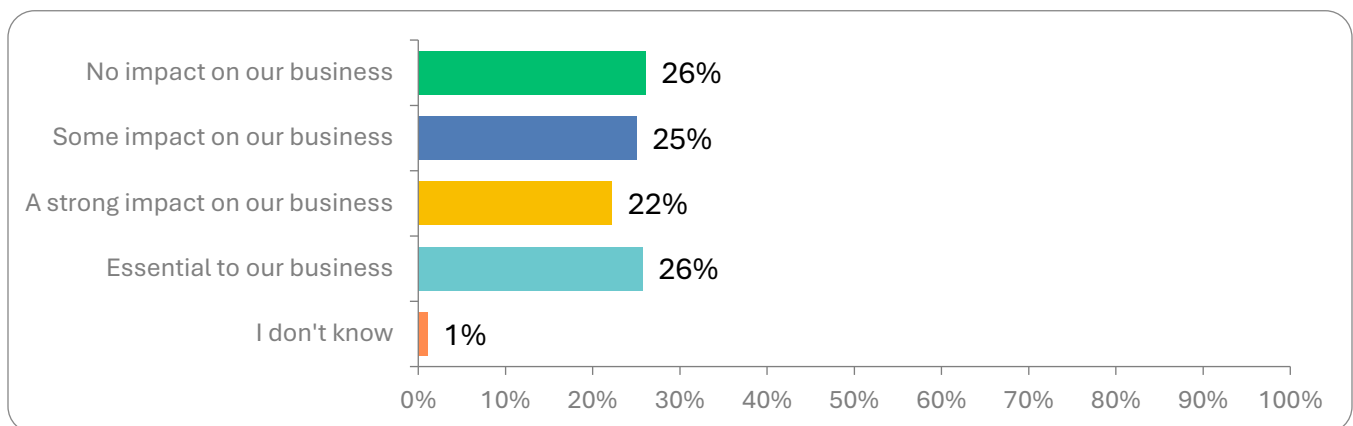
Completed responses: 284



More than half (58%) of respondents reported being in business for more than 10 years, including 38% who have operated for more than 20 years. One in four had been in business for five years or less. Overall, the respondent base consisted largely of established businesses.

Q5. Does your business rely on travelers or visitors from outside your immediate region to sustain its revenue and operations?

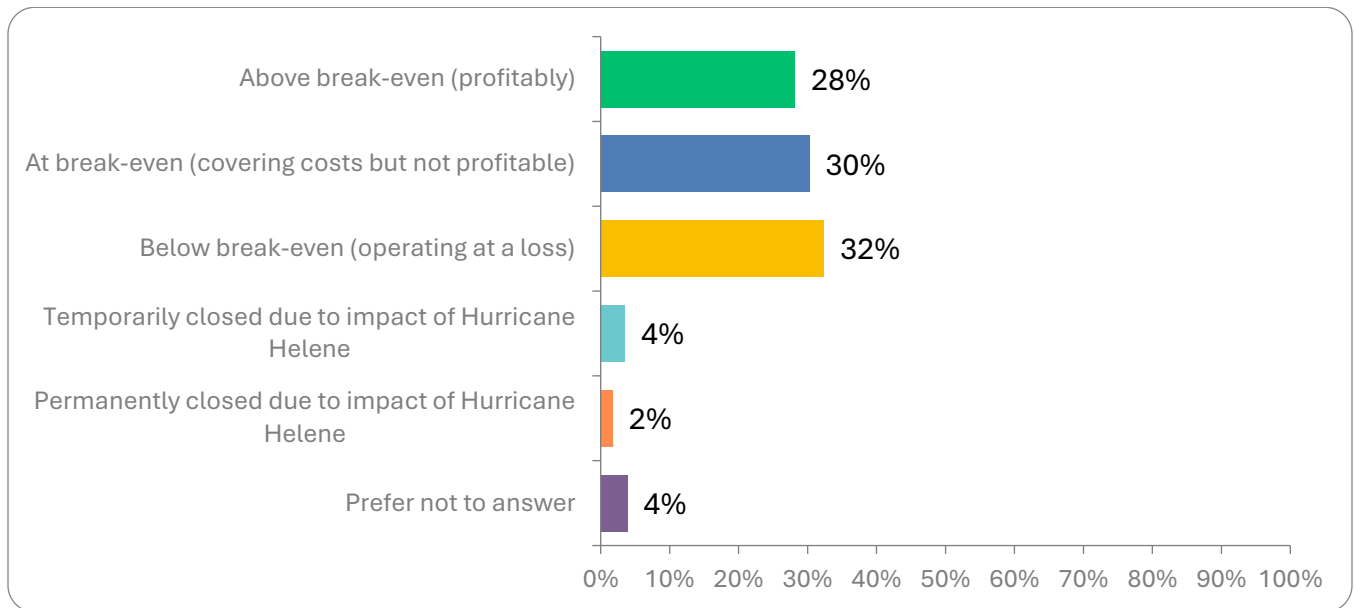
Completed responses: 284



The majority of businesses (73%) reported at least some reliance on travelers or visitors from outside their immediate region to sustain revenue and operations. Excluding "Other", Arts and Entertainment, Retail Trade, and Restaurants, Food Services, Drinking Places reported the highest shares with at least some visitor reliance. The combined Accommodation categories, Restaurants, Food Services, Drinking Places, and Arts and Entertainment reported the highest shares identifying visitors as essential to their business. Professional and Business Services, Healthcare, and Manufacturing reported the least reliance on visitors.

Q6. Since Hurricane Helene’s impact in September of 2024, which of the following best describes your business’s current status as it relates to the storm?

Completed responses: 284



Nearly two-thirds (62%) of respondents reported operating at or below break-even, including 32% operating below break-even and 30% operating at break-even. An additional 6% reported being temporarily or permanently¹ closed due to Hurricane Helene. Only 28% of respondents reported operating above break-even.

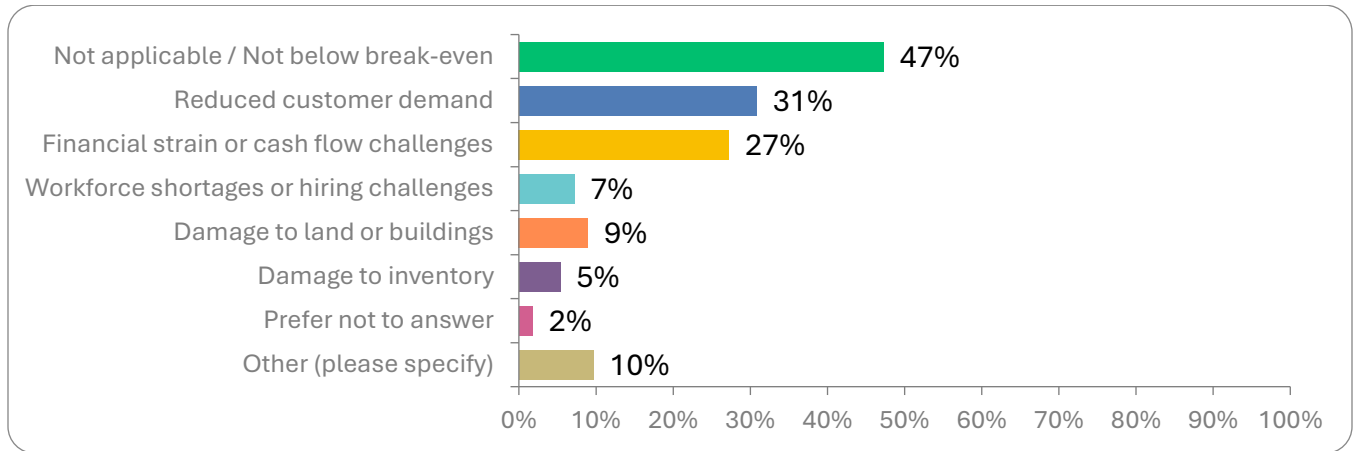
The overall distribution of responses remained relatively stable compared with the second survey respondent pool. The share of respondents operating below break-even increased slightly from 30% to 32%, while the shares reporting above break-even and at break-even were unchanged. Temporary and permanent closures declined modestly.

Respondents in Professional and Business Services reported the highest share operating above break-even. Excluding “Other”, Healthcare reported the highest share operating at break-even. Arts and Entertainment reported the highest share operating below break-even.

¹ Permanently closed respondents skip to Question 19.

Q7. If you are operating below break-even or temporarily closed, what is the main reason? (Select all that apply)

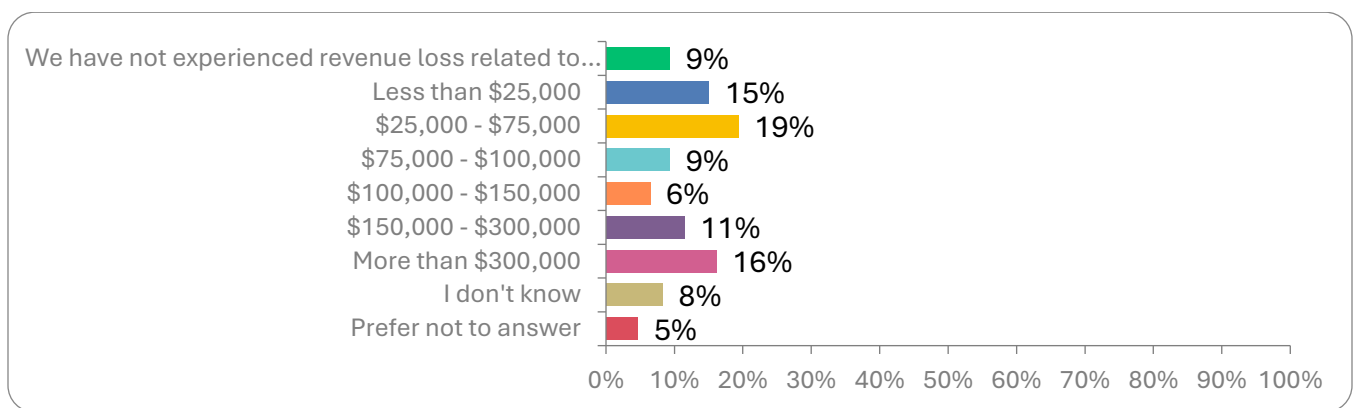
Completed responses: 279



Respondents most frequently cited reduced customer demand (31%) and financial strain (27%) as reasons for operating below break-even or being temporarily closed. This was generally consistent with the second survey respondent pool, although financial strain was reported slightly more frequently, while damage to land or buildings and damage to inventory were reported less frequently.

Q8. Please estimate your business’s total revenue loss related to Hurricane Helene to date, if any.

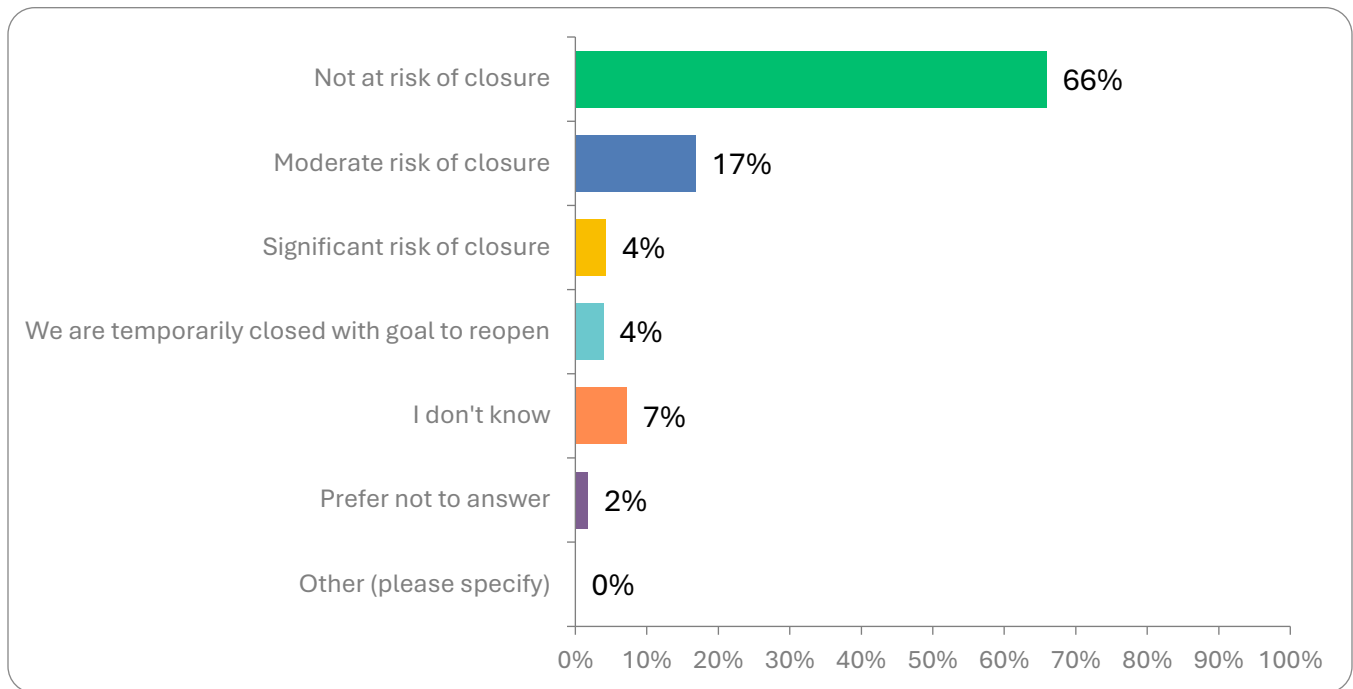
Completed responses: 279



More than three in four (76%) estimated some level of revenue loss. Forty-three percent reported losses of \$100,000 or less. The largest share (19%) reported losses between \$25,000 and \$75,000, while nearly one in six (16%) estimated revenue losses exceeding \$300,000.

Q9. How confident are you that your business will remain open over the next 6 months?

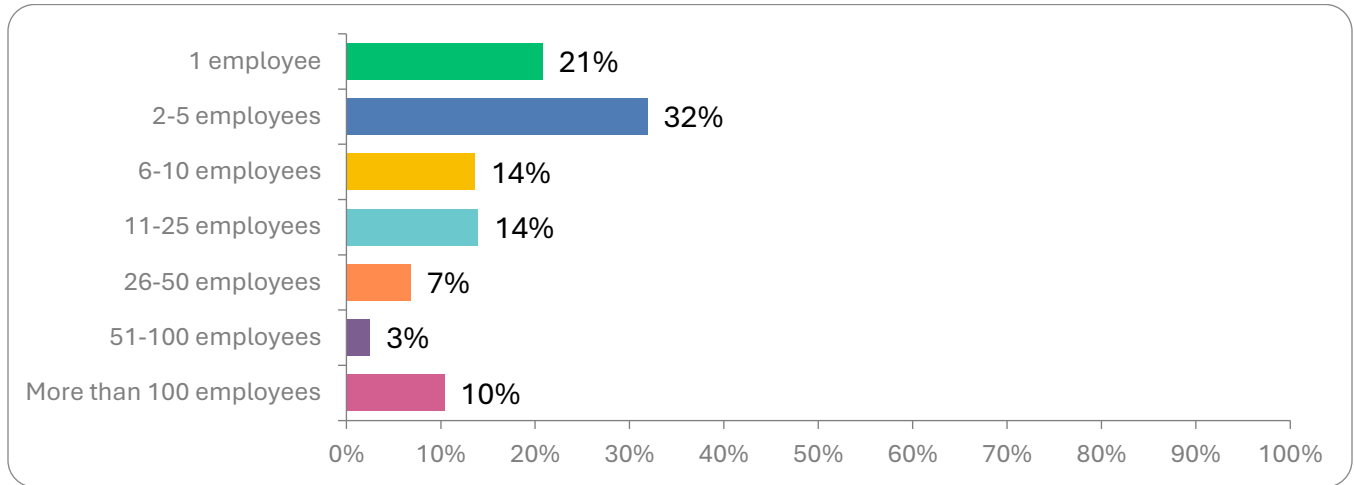
Completed responses: 279



The majority of respondents (66%) reported their business was not at risk of closure over the next six months, similar to the second survey respondent pool. Twenty-one percent reported a moderate or significant risk of closure. An additional 4% reported being temporarily closed with the goal of reopening (11 responses).

Q10. Before Hurricane Helene, what was your business's employee size in Western North Carolina (full-time and part-time)?

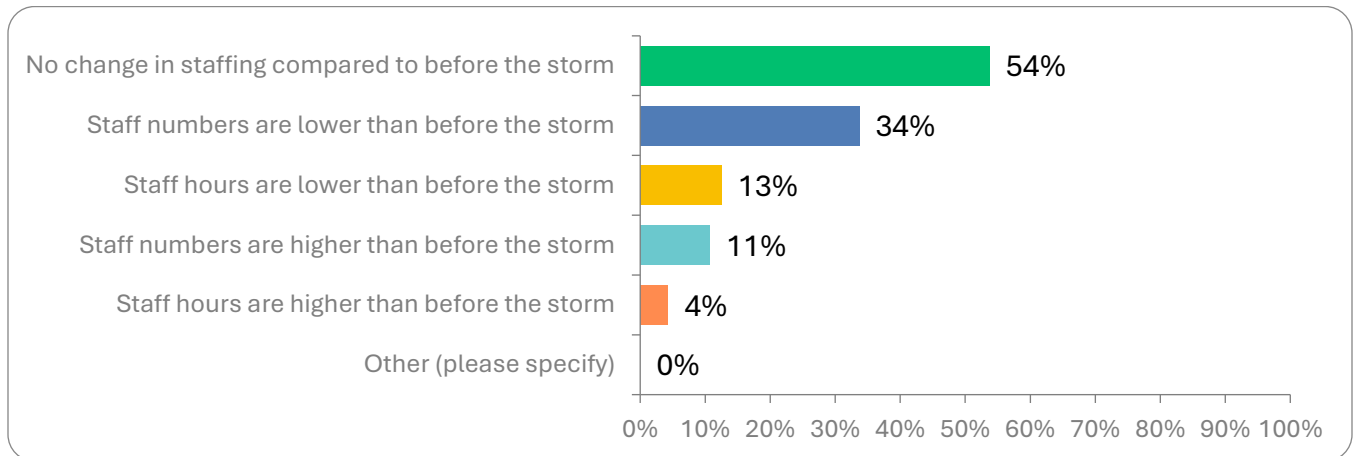
Completed responses: 279



Roughly four out of five respondents (81%) reported having 25 or fewer employees, including 53% with 5 or fewer employees. Thirteen percent had more than 50 employees.

Q11. What are your current staffing levels? (Select all that apply)

Completed responses: 279

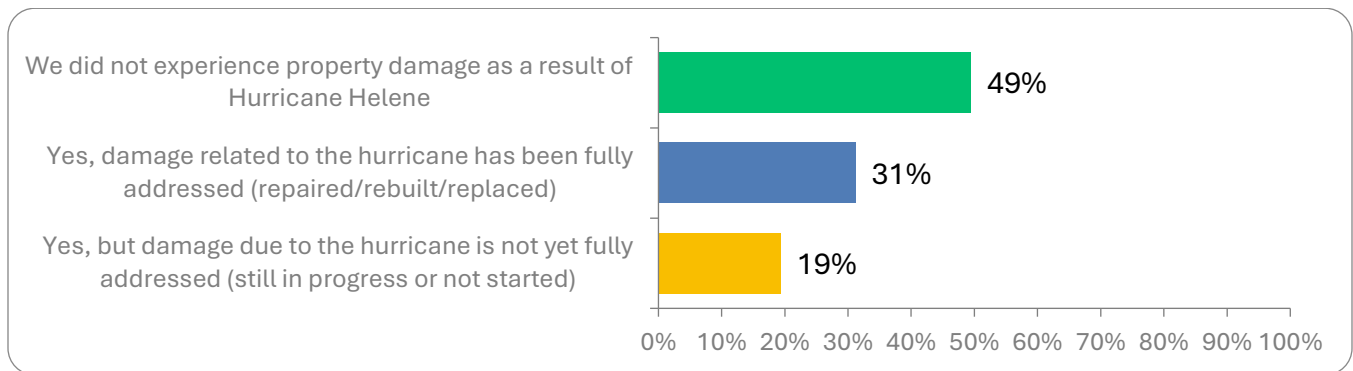


Just over half of responding businesses (54%) reported no change in staffing levels compared to before Hurricane Helene. However, staff numbers were lower for 34% and staff hours were lower for 13%.

The combined Accommodations categories reported the highest share with reduced staff numbers or reduced staff hours. Professional and Business Services reported the highest share with no change in staffing levels, higher staff numbers, or higher staff hours.

Q12. Did your business experience property damage from Hurricane Helene, and if so, has it been addressed?

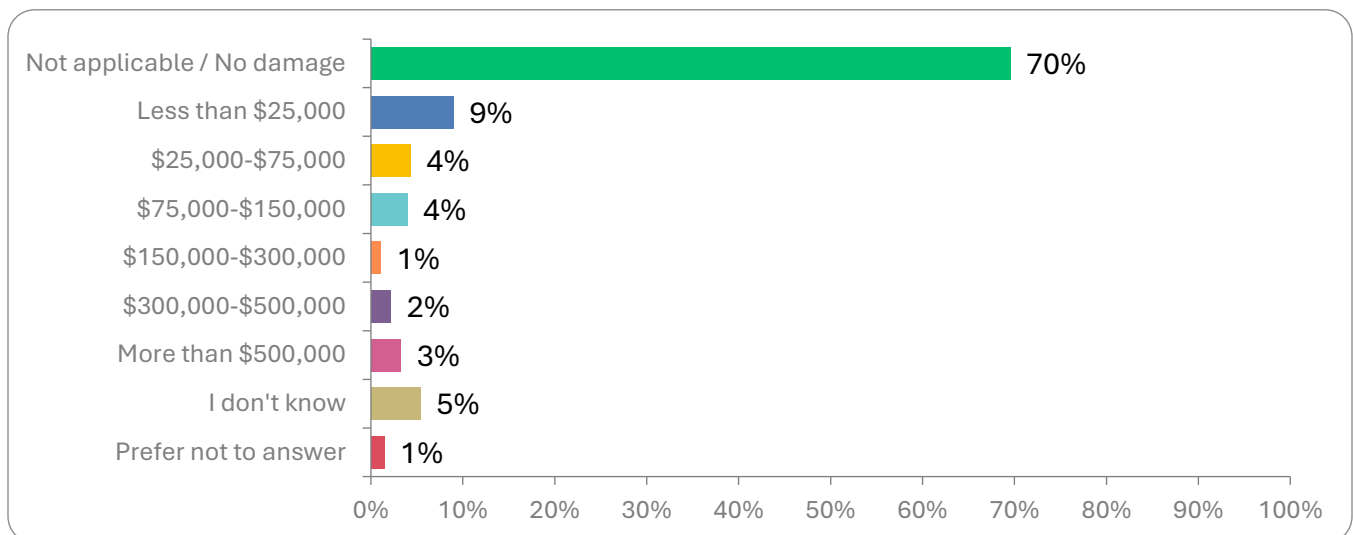
Completed responses: 279



Property damage from Hurricane Helene that had not yet been fully addressed was reported by just under one in five businesses (19%). Nearly half of respondents (49%) reported not experiencing property damage, while 31% reported that property damage had been fully addressed approximately one and a half years after the storm. This was similar to the second survey respondent pool.

Q13. If damage is not yet fully addressed, what is the estimated cost of outstanding property damage?

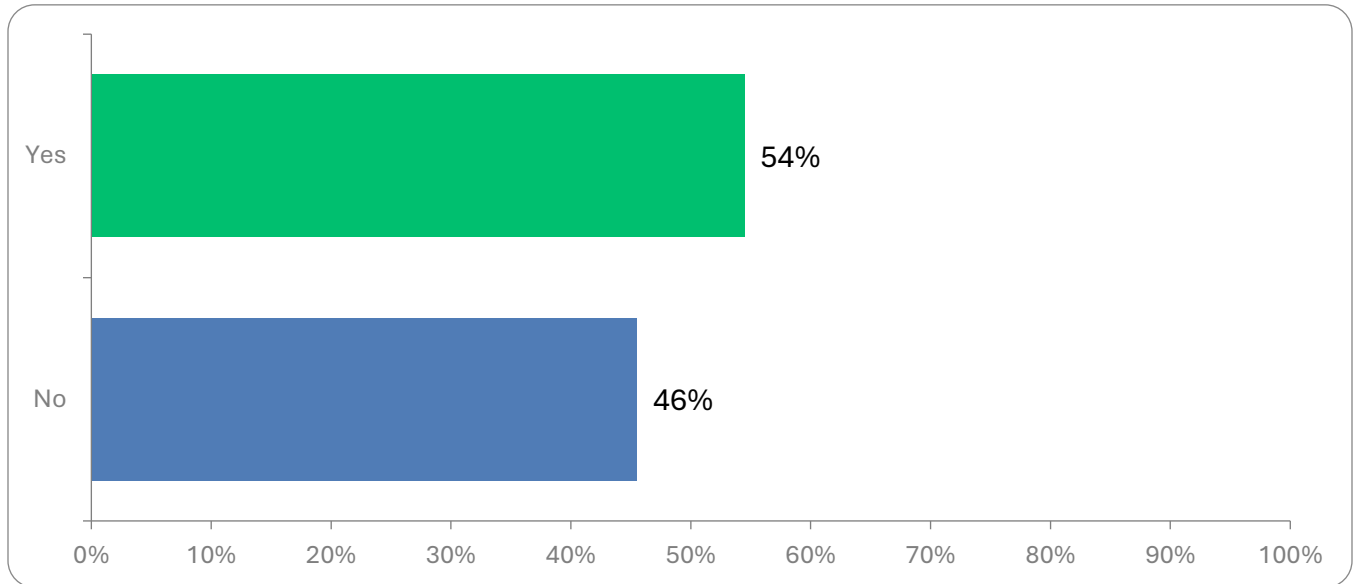
Completed responses: 279



Twenty-three percent of respondents reported estimated costs related to property damage that had not been fully addressed. Ranges varied with approximately 6% (18 businesses) reporting costs of \$150,000 or more, including 3% (9 businesses) estimating costs exceeding \$500,000.

Q14. Do you currently need recovery support to stabilize or fully recover from the impacts of Hurricane Helene?

Completed responses: 279

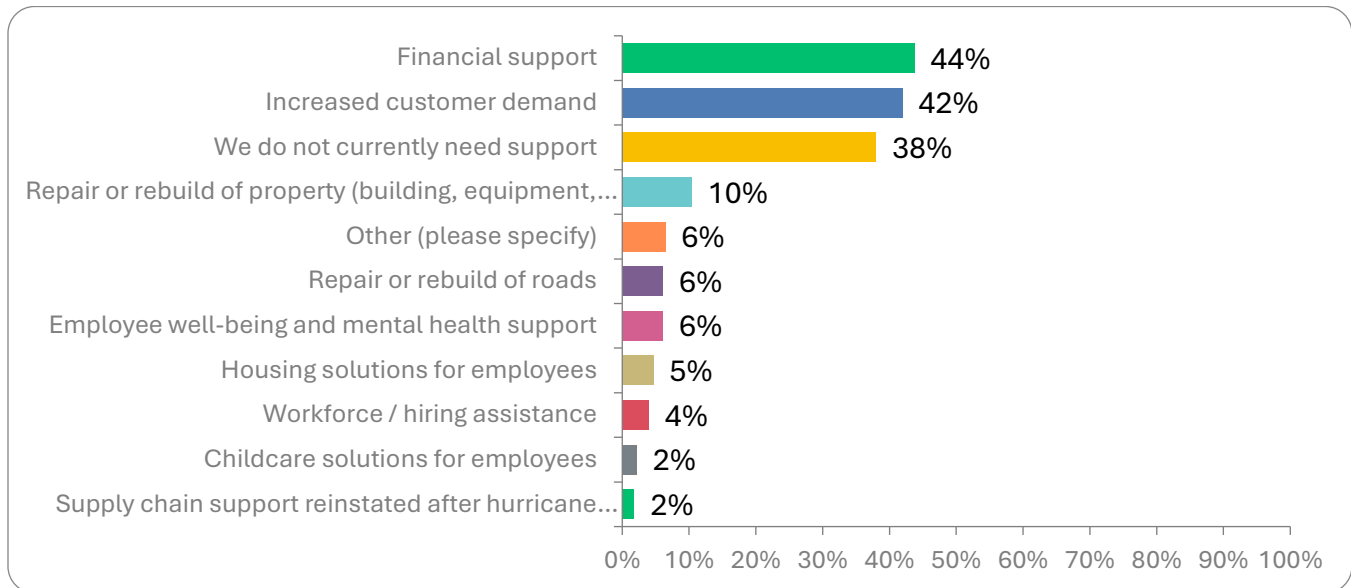


Just over half of respondents (54%) reported needing recovery support to stabilize or fully recover from the impacts of Hurricane Helene approximately one and a half years after the storm. This represented 152 respondents.

Arts and Entertainment reported the highest share of respondents needing assistance, followed by Retail Trade, the combined Accommodations categories, and Restaurants, Food Services, Drinking Places. Each of these industries is directly tied to, or closely associated with, the broader Leisure and Hospitality sector. However, respondents in each industry category reported needing recovery support.

Q15. If yes, what types of support does your organization need most right now to address impacts from Hurricane Helene? Please select up to three.

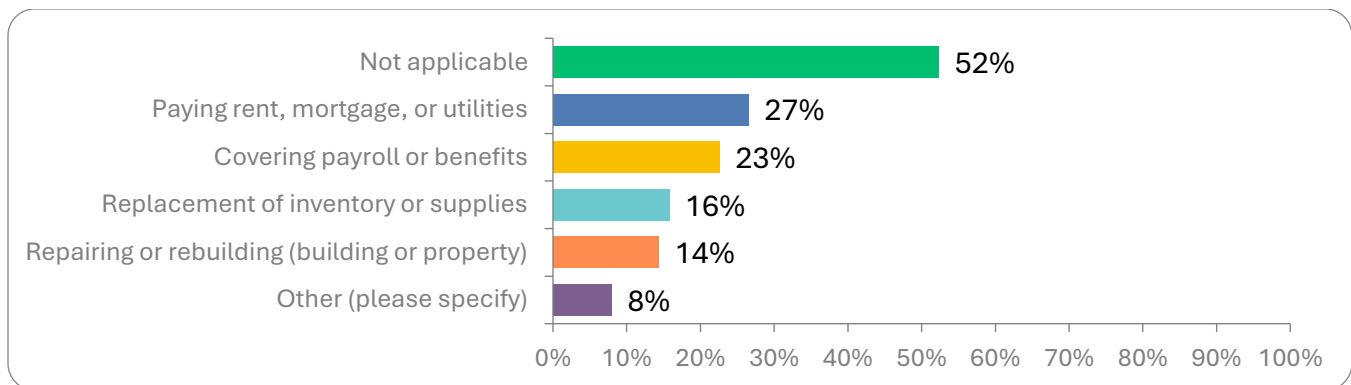
Completed responses: 279



Consistent with the previous two surveys, respondents needing recovery support most frequently identified financial assistance and increased customer demand as their greatest needs, followed by repair and rebuilding-related needs. Respondents identified needs across the range of response categories. Comments in the “Other” category highlighted that other business closures affected their operations (ripple effects), the need for affordable workspace, potential challenges around commercial inventory replacement or extended wait times, and the ongoing business impacts of damage to rivers.

Q16. If you selected financial support, what would these funds primarily be used for? (Select all that apply)

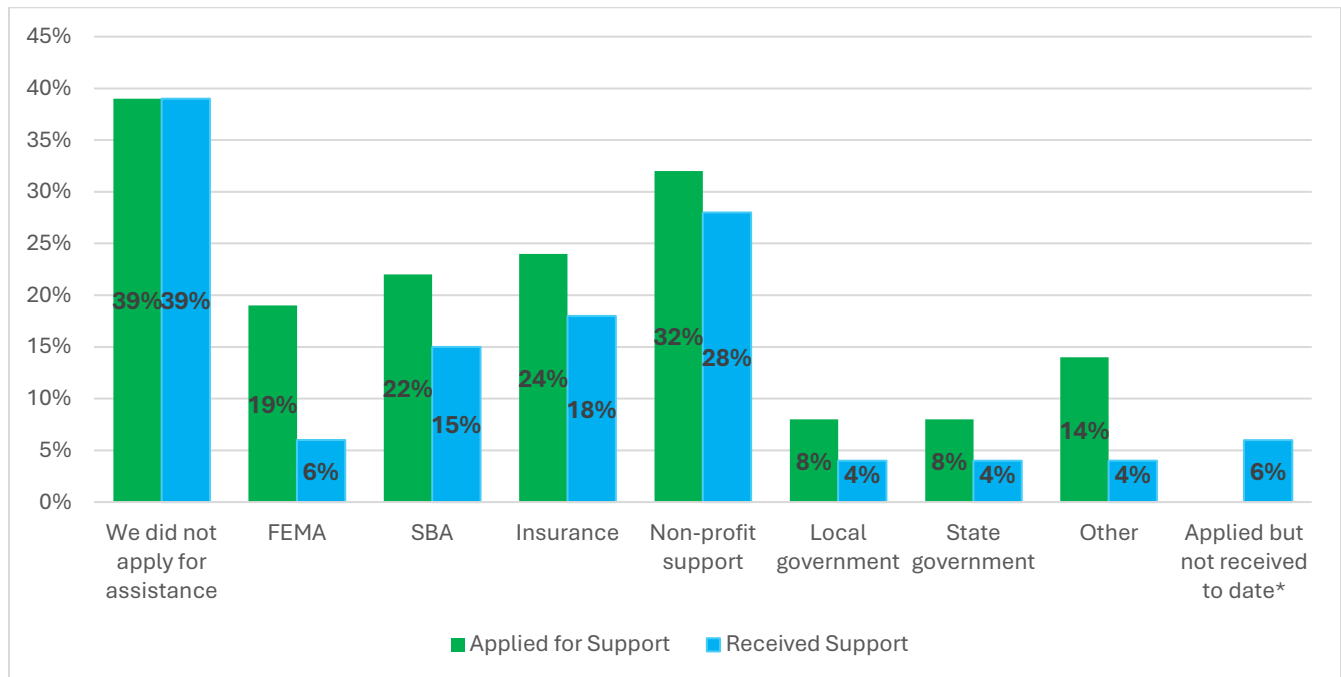
Completed responses: 279



Respondents most frequently identified funding for basic operating needs, including paying rent, mortgage, or utilities (27%) and covering employee payroll and benefits (23%).

Q17-Q18. Financial Assistance Applied For and Received Related to Hurricane Helene (Select all that apply)

Completed responses: 279



*Applied but not received is applicable only to the Received Support question

Non-profit organizations were the most frequently reported source for both applications (32%) and assistance received (28%). Assistance through the U.S. Small Business Administration (22% applied; 15% received) and insurance (24% applied; 18% received) were also commonly reported. Six percent of respondents indicated they had applied for assistance but had not yet received funding.

These results summarize reported applications and assistance received but do not indicate why assistance may not have been received, whether applications were still under review, or whether funding received fully met business needs.

Q19: Optional comments: Looking back since Hurricane Helene, what has worked well and what has not --- for your organization or for the business community more broadly? Please feel free to share anything else related to the storm and your business, or ongoing needs.

145 responses

Many respondents took the time to offer valuable feedback. Highlighted responses include:

- Financial support that either helped businesses or continues to be needed.
- Reduced customer demand affecting operations and recovery.
- Roads, debris removal, repairs, and rebuilding identified as needs.
- Application processes, permitting, reporting requirements, and other administrative processes that could be slow or complicated.
- Staffing, hiring, and employee retention as concerns for some businesses.

Additionally, comments frequently recognized assistance provided by government agencies, nonprofit organizations, volunteers, and the broader business community, as well as community members coming together to support recovery.

End Notes

Percentages have been rounded throughout the report; as a result, totals may not sum to exactly 100%. Both percentages and response counts provide useful background when interpreting findings.

The survey results reflect the perspectives of respondents at a specific point in time and are not extrapolated to represent the entire Western North Carolina business community. The respondent pool may not fully reflect all affected businesses, as those with the time, capacity, or strong motivation to share feedback may have been more likely to participate. This is the third of three surveys, with the first conducted in February 2025, the second open from late September through October 2025, and the third open from late April to mid-June 2026. (0726)

Thank you to our business community, partners, and supporters.

For more information, please contact RiverbirdResearch@AshevilleChamber.org

