



## GOVERNMENT

## McDowell residents feel forgotten, overwhelmed as they face flood recovery with limited help

In damaged homes, walls and carpet are still wet after a historic flood in February. Without volunteers or funding, community members worry about their future.

BY: **AMELIA FERRELL KNISELY** - APRIL 23, 2025 6:00 AM



📷 Ashley Rutherford, of Berwind, W.Va., and her four children have been living out of plastic totes since February when a devastating flood swept through McDowell County. (Sydnei Tatum for West Virginia Watch)

MCDOWELL COUNTY, West Virginia – When the flood water [swept through](#) McDowell County, West Virginia, in February, Ashley Rutherford sat in her wheelchair, unable to get out of her home as the water started coming through the doorway. One of her sons put rubber rain boots on her to cover her legs while the water came in.

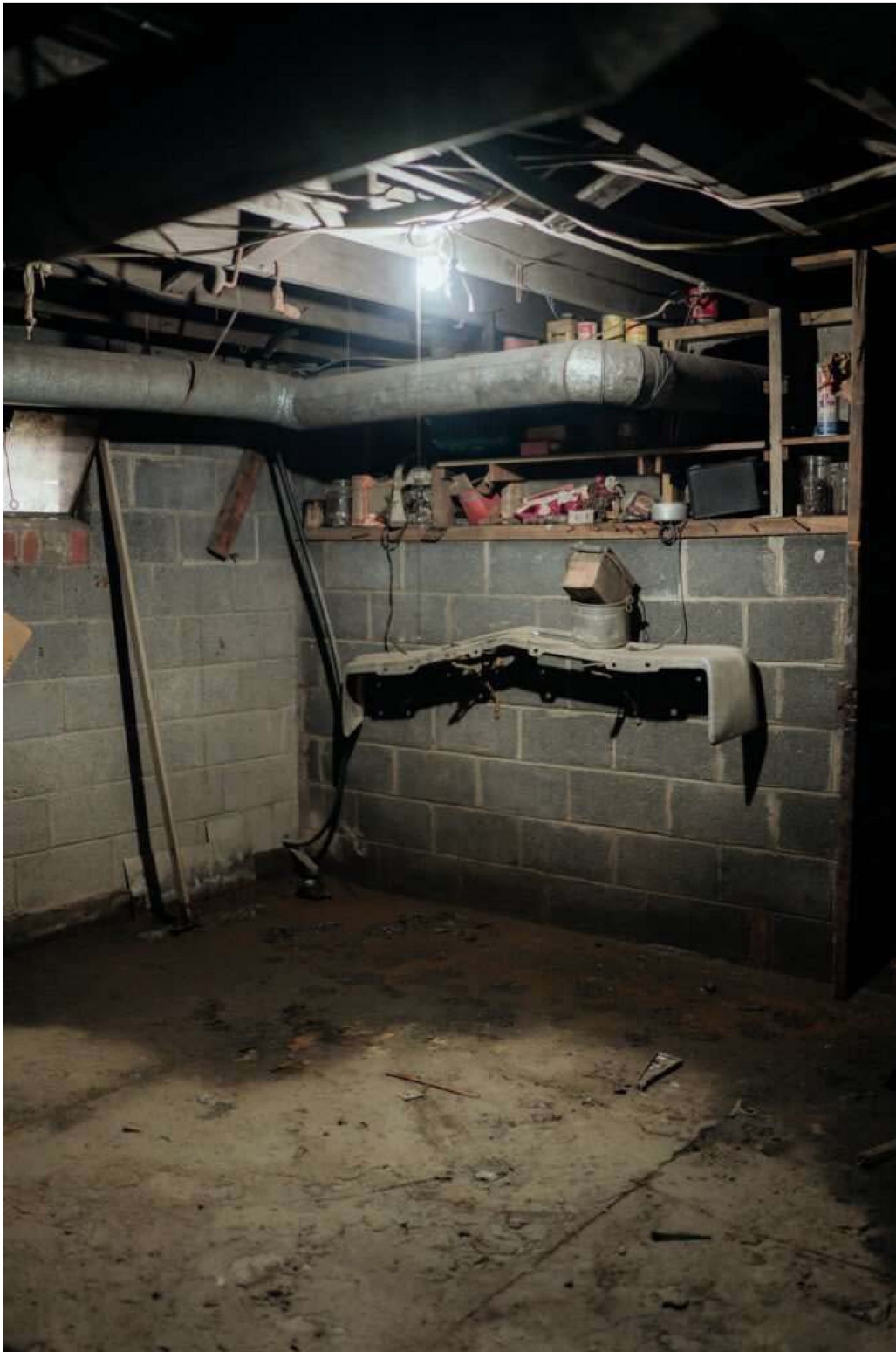
Nine weeks later, the carpet in the home is still wet. The kitchen's wooden floor is damp and buckling, and Rutherford's wheelchair got stuck in a new hole in front of the sink. The downstairs rooms are full of her family's stuff, crowding the path for her to get around.

"I'm overwhelmed," said Rutherford, 33, a mother of four. "We're living out of totes right now. My daughter can't find the right outfit she wants to wear to school."

Rutherford lives in Berwind, one of the poor county's most southern towns. In its hollers, residents – many of whom are elderly – are waiting for help. They need federal aid. A stove. Volunteers to help them clear the thick mud from their basements.

There hasn't been nearly enough help, and people feel forgotten by disaster relief agencies, nonprofit organizations and state government leaders in Charleston.

Many of McDowell's residents are unable or unlikely to leave their long-time family homes, resulting in them now sitting in damp structures – some still without heat or [running water](#) – while mold starts to set in.



📷 Mold has started growing in Dale Blevins' basement in McDowell County after the flood. (Sydnei Tatum for West Virginia Watch)

Dale Blevins, 70, stood in her damp basement, where patches of crystalized white mold were forming on the concrete walls. Volunteers cleaned out her basement after the flood; she didn't know who would come in to remove the mold. Her husband relies on an oxygen tank, and the mold was likely already a danger for his health.

“I hate to ask for help,” she said, adding she hadn’t heard from any local or state officials. “Nobody has ever come here.”

The National Guard, church groups and other volunteers [made their way through](#) the county to help out. Those efforts have largely dried up. The local churches, many with elderly congregations, are limited in how they can help. Hundreds of homes still need to be cleared out and cleaned, residents say.

“We need the boots on the ground who are physically able to do the muck outs,” said Michael Brooks, a McDowell County commissioner. “It is hard work, it’s brutal work and very time consuming ... I don’t know if some realize how dire the need is.”

Sydnei Tatum, 33, is a local business owner and photographer who took the images for this story. Over the last two months, she has cleaned out basements, handed out grocery gift cards and made lists of residents in need of everything from beds to refrigerators.

“I’m gonna fight for these people, because they have no one else to do it for them,” she said.

Tatum blamed the lack of recovery efforts on state leaders’ failure to prioritize McDowell County. They’d downplayed the crisis, she said.

“Purely because nobody is interested in the poorest areas of the county, and we are in it,” she said.

In February, Gov. Patrick Morrisey [said the state](#) “was in a position to act quickly,” while also [requesting](#) a federal disaster declaration to unlock resources for affected counties.

“We want to make sure we’re helping these southern counties recover,” Morrisey said at a press conference on [Feb. 20](#) after visiting some parts of McDowell.

His spokesperson didn’t reply to questions for this story about the status of recovery efforts.

The flooding, which [killed three people](#), happened during the legislative session; it wasn’t a major topic among lawmakers.

There isn’t dedicated funding in the [recently-approved state budget](#) for McDowell’s flood recovery.





Left: Carol Lester and husband, D. Lester, stand in front of their home in McDowell County on April 21, 2025. Right: Items discarded from a vacated home after the flooding in McDowell County. (Sydnei Tatum for West Virginia Watch)

### Limited county funds, endless clean-up work

Carol Lester, 73, stood on her porch in Bartley, overlooking her washed out, sandy yard. She'd survived the flood, having to be rescued by two young men as water rushed into her kitchen and living room. She recalled how 911 couldn't help her, then two men showed up and carried her husband, who is disabled, through the woods for five hours in the cold rain.

"We've been through five floods. This was the worst," said Lester, who has been in her home for 51 years. "It seemed like you could hear the devil and his demons in that water."

A destroyed sofa set was discarded in front of her house. It needed to be hauled away. She was waiting on a plywood delivery, hopeful that her family members could rip up her water-logged flooring.

No one other than Tatum had been by her house since the flood, Lester said.

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Nobody cares, I'm telling you, this day and time.

– Carol Lester

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Before the flood, McDowell was already facing hardships. It's one of the poorest counties in the country, and some residents haven't had clean drinking water [for decades](#). Much of the county is located on a flood plain, and floods have swept through before. Fewer than 18,000 people now live in the county now that mining jobs have dried up.

The drop in population has impacted county finances reliant on local taxpayers, and Brooks explained that the bulk of money collected through personal property taxes goes to the board of education.

There isn't enough left over, he said.

[Thirty-six private bridges](#) were washed out in the flood, some of which can't be covered by Federal Emergency Management Assistance (FEMA) or county money. Some bridges [may never be repaired](#).

"I wish to God that we had the funding that we could start fixing it. But, it's not a few thousand dollar fix. It's a hundreds of thousands dollar issue on some of the bridges," Brooks said.

Brooks was frustrated over social media comments saying the county or state wasn't doing enough. Morrissey had been helpful, he said, and required-government processes can be slow.

"I am bombarded, as well as the other commissioners, with more questions than answers at this juncture," he said. "It's not that we're not trying to garner the answers or we're trying to shrug these things off. But we're a small county and a lot of times we don't have resources."

FEMA, which [continues its efforts](#) in the county, and Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) didn't return requests for comment for this story. Some residents said they weren't expecting much help from the federal aid.



📷 Left: Ashley Rutherford's kitchen was destroyed by the flooding in McDowell County. Right: Trash sits on the roadside in McDowell County on April 21, 2025, after the flooding. (Sydnei Tatum for West Virginia Watch)

## Debris-filled water poses a future flood risk

The floors are still damp in Linda Wood's home in the community of Berwind.

"I'm going to need new flooring, like linoleum," said Woods, 61. She lost her stove, lawnmower, clothes, shoes and more in the flooding.

"I'm worried about the moisture getting under the mattress and causing mold," she added.

Rain is forecasted this weekend in McDowell, causing anxiety for Woods. She pointed to a nearby stream, filled with debris leftover from the flood. Without clearing it out, she said, another flood was likely to hit her community at any time.

The area's stream beds haven't been dredged or restored since the 1977 flood, WVVA [reported](#). Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., recently visited McDowell, promising to request money to clean up the streams in hopes of preventing future flooding.

Earlier this year, Morrissey [didn't request](#) funding for the state's flood mitigation efforts through the State Resiliency Office. The Republican-majority in the House of Delegates [rejected](#) a



Democratic lawmakers' proposal to put \$50 million in the state budget to protect from future floods.

Politics and state funding aren't the main topics of conversation among McDowell residents in April. Neighbors are wondering how they'll clean out their basements and remove the mountains of debris scattered alongside roads. There aren't large dumpsters in the area, and the county would need to work with the state to create a designated dumping site.

Lester looked at a holly bush in her yard that had survived the flood. Her husband bought it for her years ago.

"God left that holly bush for a reason. It weathered the storm, but it still survived," she said. "Every morning, when I get up, I look at the little holly bush. I get my strength from that."

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