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VBA to provide help after Katrina

By Brent Baldwin

The Virginia Bar Association is creating a relief fund to help lawyers in the Gulf Coast area help their clients after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina last week. The fund will be similar to previous VBA projects undertaken during past national emergencies.

The "Hurricane Katrina Legal Assistance Fund" will help lawyers in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama restore their damaged offices so they can provide needed legal services to their communities.

VBA President James V. Meath said that the group was already in contact with the bar associations in the affected states to determine the extent of need.

Meath said, "Virginia attorneys have always been good neighbors before and we believe that they will want to be such again in the aftermath of this devastation."

Persons and organizations wishing to contribute to the disaster relief effort may send tax-deductible donations to The Hurricane Katrina Legal Assistance Fund, c/o The Virginia Bar Association Foundation, 701 East Franklin, Suite 1120, Richmond, VA. 23219 or questions can be directed the VBA office at (804) 644-0041

C.B. Arrington Jr., executive vice president of the VBA, said that the group will be drawing on experiences from past relief efforts in the 1990s following Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and Hurricane Floyd in 1999. In 1997, the VBA helped out lawyers in North Dakota after that state experienced floods.

"I've spoken with the executives of the bars in Alabama and Mississippi and they're still counting fingers and toes down there," Arrington said. "They're still trying to inventory the situations of their lawyers. It's just a horrible situation."

Whether the eventual fund amount is great or modest, Arrington characterized the disaster relief fund as "an attempt to be consistent with the high standards of professionalism and to help the citizens of the area by enabling the lawyers there."

He added that the money will go directly to the state bar associations in those devastated areas who will be able to target specific areas of concern.

As of press time, concerned bar groups around the country were just beginning to gear up their efforts to help with the disaster.

Louisiana hardest hit

Virginia State Bar Executive Director Thomas A. Edmonds, who is now president of the National Association of Bar Executives, sent a message out in his regular newsletter seeking to rally fundraising efforts, particularly for Louisiana.

Edmonds said he had spoken with bar leaders in the victim states and learned that the Alabama State Bar was relatively "OK," the Mississippi State Bar was "without power," and Louisiana was a major area of concern.

Edmonds said that about a third of the roughly 18 to 20,000 lawyers in Louisiana had been affected.

"It's almost unfathomable to get your arms around the scope of the problem," he said. "What I've told them [both city and state bar leaders] is that as soon as they can make some kind of assessment about what help they need, let me know and we will try to provide whatever assistance we can, be it legal service, computer help or whatever."

Edmonds said he spoke with Loretta Larson, executive director of the Louisiana State Bar Association, who had safely left New Orleans and was waiting out the disaster in Lafayette while Interstate 10 sat underwater. He added that Director of the New Orleans Bar, Helena Henderson, was safely relocated to Florida.

Edmonds said that he felt practically every bar group in the country was trying to do something to help out.

"I think we've had about 150 e-mails exchanged today," he said. "That's what you like to see when something like this happens."

Professor Michelle Ghetti of the Southern University Law Center in Baton Rouge sent a chilling e-mail that detailed some of the problems that Louisiana lawyers are facing in such a serious natural catastrophe.

"Five thousand to 6,000 lawyers have lost their offices, their libraries, their computers, their client files, possibly their clients," she wrote. "Our state Supreme Court is under some water, with all appellate files and evidence folders/boxes along with it. The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals building is under some water—with same effect ... our state bar offices are under water ... large corporate clients may have their files blowing in the wind where the high rise buildings had windows blown out. ... It's just devastating. Can you imagine something of this dimension in your state?"

VBA's history of disaster relief

The Gulf Coast fund will be similar to past efforts the VBA has coordinated such as the 1992 drive to aid the Florida Bar in the wake of Hurricane Andrew.

After the North Dakota floods in 1997, funds raised by the VBA were used to help set up free hotlines and toll-free numbers for legal services, provide communication links between attorneys, their clients, and court offices, and also in the recruitment of professional restoration specialists to reconstruct ruined documents and records.

Following the catastrophic flooding from Hurricane Floyd in 1997, the VBA led the statewide relief effort for Franklin and Southampton County lawyers who had lost their offices, libraries, computers and communications systems because of widespread flooding.

With help from the Virginia Law Foundation, a fund was established within the VBA Foundation which totaled more than \$32,000. This was used for the creation of a centralized law library at the Southampton County Courthouse in Courtland, with computers providing access to electronic resources for lawyers.

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