

DISASTER RESPONSE

BACKGROUND

HURRICANES KATRINA AND RITA unleashed a level of devastation and disruption along the Gulf Coast that challenged even the most disaster-ready bars' ability to respond. The breakdown of state infrastructure created a flurry of urgent needs that existing disaster plans didn't address. Undeterred, the bar community quickly organized its relief effort, bringing support to the affected bars, lawyers, and the public.

STATE & LOCAL ACTIVITIES

The **Baton Rouge Bar Association** housed a legal hotline for displaced citizens (later moved to LSU law school), and provided office space to the **Louisiana State Bar Association** while it relocated. Staff members from the **State Bar of Texas** helped set up the bar's office and establish its Web site, a key means of bringing the bar community together.

Thanks to an out-of-state Web server, the **New Orleans Bar Association's** Web site remained live throughout the disaster. Using the site, wireless phones, and text messages, the bar created a database of over 4,000 e-mail addresses of members. The state's other local bars were also instrumental, providing shelter, offices, and contacts for displaced lawyers.

With headquarters in Jackson and out of the storm's fury, **The Mississippi Bar** quickly mobilized its resources. The Young Lawyers Division led the effort to assist the public, while bar staff and leaders focused on displaced lawyers.

Both the Louisiana and Mississippi Bar Foundations set up disaster relief funds and issued monetary grants to the hardest-hit lawyers and firms. The Mississippi, Louisiana, and New Orleans bars established business centers or Internet cafes in affected areas, giving displaced lawyers access to computers, telephones, and business equipment.

At least nineteen state supreme courts issued orders allowing attorneys displaced by the storms to practice law temporarily. The Louisiana and Mississippi state supreme courts reciprocated, allowing attorneys unlicensed in those states to provide emergency pro bono legal assistance. Louisiana also suspended its MCLE requirements through the end of 2005 – a move that had negative consequences for the state's bars, which rely heavily on CLE income.

Almost a year after Katrina and Rita's impact, bar associations nationwide continue to support the relief effort. The **Minnesota State Bar Association** has raised more than \$400,000. "Specialized" teams of bar staff from other states are providing lawyer assistance counseling and hosting free programs on disaster preparedness and recovery. And select members of the National Association of Bar Executives (coordinated through the ABA Division for Bar Services) are helping the New Orleans Bar Association reorganize and rebuild. A program at the midyear meeting of the National Association of Bar Executives focused on key areas for disaster planning and recovery.

ABA ACTIVITIES

The ABA convened both a staff working group and a member task force to manage its relief efforts. One of the task force's most significant early efforts was urging states impacted by the hurricanes to suspend their unlicensed practice rules to facilitate volunteer legal assistance. The Young Lawyers Division, through an agreement with FEMA, activated toll-free legal assistance hotlines in the affected states within 24 hours of Katrina's impact.

The ABA Web site was a key information source, posting news, resources for displaced legal professionals and the public, and volunteer opportunities. ABA sections donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to relief funds, and posted offers of equipment and office space for displaced lawyers.

The association's relief efforts have continued through the year, with CLE programs with a law practice management focus, and free legal assistance programs for Katrina victims. Many of these programs have been done in conjunction with the Louisiana State Bar Association. For more on the ABA's relief efforts, go to www.abanet.org/katrina/.

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