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Lawyers Work to Help Gulf Coast Brethren

Tough task: Matching those in need with offers of assistance

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Local bar associations have been overwhelmed with phone calls and e-mails from lawyers offering office space, shelter and jobs to their Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi brethren who've been hit by Hurricane Katrina.

The biggest problem for those wanting to help is connecting with those who need it. Many Gulf Coast firms hit by the hurricane no longer exist, at least for now. Meanwhile, their lawyers and staffs are scattered across several states, without working cell phones or e-mail.

The Atlanta Bar Association initially sent out an e-mail to its membership asking for housing, office space and jobs for the displaced legal community in New Orleans and elsewhere along the Gulf Coast. The bar's staff quickly was inundated with more offers than it could handle, said Diane O'Steen, the bar's executive director.

"We decided that it was bigger than us," O'Steen said, and so the Atlanta Bar has created a Web site, www.attorneyassist.org, where local lawyers can post offers of jobs, office space and housing by category.

Similarly, members of the affected legal communities can ask for help by posting on the Web site, which was modeled on Craig's List, the well-known San Francisco community Web site that has spread to other U.S. cities.

The hope is that the Web site will serve as a clearinghouse where those who want to give can find those who need aid, said Elizabeth A. Price, the Atlanta Bar's president.

The executive director of the New Orleans Bar Association, Helena N. Henderson, has taken refuge in Shalimar, on the Florida Panhandle, where she is setting up an office in exile for the flooded-out bar. She sent O'Steen an e-mail imploring the Atlanta Bar for help.

Henderson said her most pressing job right now is helping New Orleans lawyers relocate their offices. The bar director, who on Friday still had family members in New Orleans whom she had not heard from, said by e-mail that she is desperate for reinforcements to help her with the overwhelming needs of her bar's members.

In response, the Atlanta Bar has sent the New Orleans Bar director, as well as a staffer who fled to Oakdale, La., computers, printers, copiers and office supplies. Money for supplies has been a problem for the New Orleans Bar because its bank accounts are inaccessible.

Henderson said in an e-mail that most of her lawyers no longer have working cell phone or personal e-mail accounts, but some have been able to make use of BlackBerries or Martindale-Hubble e-mail accounts to communicate. The New Orleans Bar's Web site could not be updated last week, which meant it couldn't be used to communicate with members.

The executive director of the State Bar of Georgia, Clifton A. Brashier Jr., said there has been so much e-mail traffic on various listservs from lawyers and bar associations wanting to help that they've almost shut down his e-mail system. "They're coming up faster than you can read them. I've never seen as much volume," he said, adding that this likely will be the largest relief effort ever in the United States.

On Friday the State Bar of Georgia sent an e-mail to its 37,000 members asking for contact information for any displaced lawyers in Georgia who need help. The e-mail also suggested that State Bar members donate money to a charity of their choice, including the American Red Cross and the Louisiana State Bar Association's relief fund.

Donations to the Louisiana Bar should be sent to the Baton Rouge Bar Foundation at 544 Main St., Baton Rouge, La., 70802. They should be earmarked for the Hurricane Katrina Community Relief Fund.

The Georgia Bar also is providing office space to displaced lawyers at the State Bar Headquarters on Marietta Street. Robert D. Ingram, the State Bar's president, noted that many lawyers who've been displaced by the hurricane are now in Georgia.

"We're offering to make the State Bar center available free of charge to lawyers displaced from Katrina," he said. Ingram did not know how many lawyers the space could accommodate but said the bar would take in as many as it can.

The Georgia Bar's Young Lawyers Division is spearheading the statewide effort to staff a disaster assistance hotline being set up by the American Bar Association. Georgia lawyers can volunteer to answer questions from hurricane victims about insurance claims, unemployment compensation, lost identification and other issues, said Damon E. Elmore, the group's president.

Firms, Law Schools Help Out

The Red Cross has announced that cash donations are what it needs most. Atlanta law firms have responded with gusto. By Thursday, Kilpatrick Stockton already had raised \$30,000 for hurricane victims.

Troutman Sanders has donated \$25,000, and its lawyers individually have contributed another \$12,000. Troutman lawyers also filled a moving van with clothing and supplies for a colleague with relatives in Mississippi hit by the hurricane. He drove off last week to deliver the supplies and the extras were given to a local shelter.

Chamberlain, Hrdlicka, White, Williams & Martin announced it will match employee contributions up to \$10,000. McKenna Long & Aldridge also will match donations, dollar for dollar.

Georgia law schools also have pitched in to help New Orleans law students whose educations have been curtailed by Katrina. The Emory University School of Law will accept 40 students from Tulane and Loyola universities' law schools for the fall semester, effective immediately. Classes at Emory started last week.

The University of Georgia School of Law is accepting Georgia residents. Others will be evaluated on an individual basis. The Georgia State University College of Law and John Marshall Law School also are accepting second- and third-year law students from the flooded city. Georgia State will charge only a \$100 registration fee, and John Marshall will allow them to take classes without charge.

Five students from Tulane and Loyola already have contacted John Marshall, said its dean, John E. Ryan. "We're offering them a home," he said. "All they need to do is show up."

Between 30 and 40 students have contacted Georgia State, said interim Dean Steven J. Kaminshine. He added that some alumni and GSU students have offered housing to displaced students.

About 100 law schools across the country have extended offers to help displaced students through the Association of American Law Schools, which is coordinating the effort.

Legal Aid for Victims

Georgia Legal Services is coordinating the statewide effort to provide legal aid to hurricane victims. "The real onslaught has not hit yet," said its executive director, Phyllis Holman. That will happen as people start to run out of money and need government benefits, she said—and then later, when and if they try to rebuild their destroyed homes and businesses.

"Legal services lawyers have a lot of benefits expertise that other lawyers do not have," said Holman—most notably disaster unemployment benefits from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The legal aid lawyers will canvass the 12 Georgia shelters that have been designated for hurricane victims, as well as local Department of Family and Children Services offices and county clerks' offices, she said.

Holman referred lawyers wishing to provide legal aid to hurricane victims to the Georgia Bar Pro Bono Project's Web site at www.georgiaadvocates.org.

General legal information on coping with the disaster is available at [www.legalaid ga.org](http://www.legalaid.ga.org).

Daily Report intern Wendy Moses contributed to this report.