



**JOINT PRESS RELEASE**  
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**FREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE  
FOR MISSISSIPPI STORM VICTIMS**

JACKSON, MS. January 31, 2017 - As a result of the recent severe storms, tornadoes, straight-line winds, and flooding in Mississippi, the Young Lawyers Division Disaster Legal Services Committee of The Mississippi Bar in conjunction with FEMA, the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division, the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, and Mississippi Center for Legal Services, is providing free disaster legal assistance efforts to individuals that were affected by the recent storms in **Forrest, Lamar, Lauderdale, and Perry counties**. Free disaster legal assistance is now being provided for individuals who are affected by the severe storms, tornadoes, straight-line winds, and flooding which occurred on January 20-21, 2017. The toll free number for the Young Lawyers Division Disaster Legal Assistance is **1-877-691-6185** and storm survivors may now call the hotline between 9:00am and 4:00pm on Monday through Friday. Local legal aid providers will be available to help with the following:

- Assistance securing FEMA and other government benefits available to disaster victims;
- Assistance with life, medical, and property insurance claims;
- Help with home repair contracts and contractors;
- Replacement of wills and other important legal documents lost or destroyed in the disaster;

- Consumer protections such as price-gouging and avoiding contractor scams in the rebuilding process;
- Counseling on mortgage-foreclosure problems; and
- Counseling on landlord-tenant problems

Joe M. Girot has been named as the Federal Coordinating Officer for federal recovery operations in the affected area.

Storm survivors may call the toll free number and a volunteer attorney will respond by telephone to answer their legal questions. The goal is to assist as many individuals affected by the storms as possible.

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### **Major Disaster Declaration**

On January 25, 2017, The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) announced that federal disaster assistance has been made available to the State of Mississippi to supplement state, tribal and local recovery efforts in the area affected by severe storms, tornadoes, straight-line winds, and flooding during the period of January 20-21, 2017. The President's action makes federal funding available to affected individuals in Forrest, Lamar, Lauderdale, and Perry counties.

Mississippians who sustained property damage as a result of the severe storms, tornadoes, straight-line winds, and flooding are urged to register with FEMA, as they may be eligible for federal and state disaster assistance. People who sustained storm damage in the affected counties above can register for FEMA assistance online at [www.DisasterAssistance.gov](http://www.DisasterAssistance.gov) or via smartphone or Web-enabled device at [m.fema.gov](http://m.fema.gov). Applicants may also call 800-621-FEMA (3362) or 1-800-462-7585 (TTY) from 7 am to 10 pm daily. Applicants should be prepared to provide basic information about themselves (name, permanent address and phone number), insurance coverage and any other information to help substantiate the loss. In addition, there is information available at [www.DisasterLegalAid.org](http://www.DisasterLegalAid.org).

### **Beware of Fraud**

Both FEMA and the Mississippi Attorney General's Office urge Mississippians to be aware of the risk of fraud and common scams in the wake of severe weather. Common post-disaster fraud practices include phony housing inspectors, fraudulent building contractors, bogus pleas for disaster donations, and fake offers of state or federal aid. Mississippians are urged to ask questions and to require identification when someone claims to represent a government agency.

Affected individuals should also keep in mind that state and federal workers never ask for or accept money and always carry identification badges with a photograph. There is no fee required to apply for or to receive disaster assistance from FEMA, the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), or the State. Additionally, no state or federal government disaster assistance agency will call to ask for your financial account information. Unless you place a call to the agency yourself, you should not provide personal information over the phone as it can lead to identity theft.

Those who suspect fraud can call the FEMA Disaster Fraud Hotline at 866-720-5721 (toll free). Complaints may also be made to local law enforcement.

### **Background**

When the U.S. President declares a major disaster, FEMA, in cooperation with the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division, establishes a toll-free number for disaster survivors to request legal assistance. Funding for the toll-free line comes from FEMA under the authority of Section 415 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Public Law 100-707). The American Bar Association Young Lawyers

Division in turn joins with state bar associations and other legal organizations to recruit volunteer lawyers in affected areas to handle survivors' cases. In this instance, there will be no additional expense for the federal government, because the State Bar Association is offering use of its existing toll-free line. However, victims should be aware that there are some limitations on disaster legal services. For example, assistance is not available for cases that will produce a fee (i.e., those cases where attorneys are paid part of the settlement by the court).

### **Partnership Members**

The following organizations have joined forces to support a toll-free phone line for Mississippi storm survivors to request free legal assistance, and to provide volunteer attorneys to handle cases arising from recent storm damage.

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division - The ABA YLD, the largest national organization of young lawyers, provides leadership in serving the public and the profession, and promotes excellence and fulfillment in the practice of law. Its parent organization, the ABA, is the national voice of the legal profession and one of the largest voluntary professional membership groups in the world.

Federal Emergency Management Agency – FEMA coordinates the federal government's role in preparing for, preventing, mitigating the effects of, responding to, and recovering from all domestic disasters, whether natural or man-made, including acts of terror.

Mississippi Bar Young Lawyers Division – The Bar was founded in 1906. Today all of Mississippi's 8,000+ lawyers are members of the Bar. The Bar's Young Lawyers Division has been providing disaster legal assistance in Mississippi since Hurricane Camille in 1969. The Bar's Young Lawyers Division is composed of lawyers under the age of 37.

National Disaster Legal Aid Online – NDLA (available at: <http://disasterlegalaid.org/>) is a collaborative effort of Lone Star Legal Aid, the American Bar Association, the Legal Services Corporation, the National Legal Aid and Defender Association, and Pro Bono Net.

Mississippi Center for Legal Services– (available at: <http://www.mslegalservices.org>) Mississippi Center for Legal Services is a Legal Services Corporation (LSC) grantee program which provides free civil legal services to low income and seniors in the State of Mississippi.