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Free Legal Assistance Available for Virginia Victims of Hurricane Matthew

Partnership among the Virginia State Bar Young Lawyers Conference, Legal Aid Society of Eastern Virginia, American Bar Association, and FEMA

November 4, 2016 – A toll-free legal aid hotline is now available for victims of Hurricane Matthew in Virginia. The service, which allows callers to request the assistance of a lawyer, is a partnership between the Virginia State Bar Young Lawyers Conference, Legal Aid Society of Eastern Virginia, the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Hurricane survivors facing legal issues may call (800) 552-7977, the assistance hotline activated by the Virginia State Bar Young Lawyers Conference. Callers should identify that they are seeking Hurricane Matthew-related legal assistance, ask for Disaster Legal Services, and should identify whether they are located in the independent city of Chesapeake, Newport News, Norfolk, or Virginia Beach. Survivors who qualify for assistance will be matched with Virginia lawyers who have volunteered to provide free legal help. An attorney referral fee will be waived for Hampton Roads residents affected by Hurricane Matthew.

Examples of legal assistance available include:

- Assistance with securing FEMA and other benefits available to disaster survivors
- Assistance with life, medical and property insurance claims
- Help with home repair contracts and contractors
- Counseling on landlord/tenant and mortgage-foreclosure problems
- Replacement of wills and other important legal documents destroyed in the disaster
- Assisting in consumer protection matters, remedies, and procedures

The hotline is available weekdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Individuals who qualify for assistance will be matched with Virginia lawyers who have volunteered to provide free, limited legal help. Survivors 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 fees are paid part of the settlement by the court). Such cases are referred to a lawyer referral service.

Major Disaster Declaration

Four independent cities in Virginia have been approved to receive federal assistance in the wake of Hurricane Matthew. The independent cities are Chesapeake, Newport News, Norfolk, and Virginia Beach.

People who sustained property damage as a result of Hurricane Matthew are urged to register with FEMA, as they may be eligible for federal and state disaster assistance. People can register online at DisasterAssistance.gov or via smartphone or Web-enabled device at m.fema.gov. Applicants may also call (800) 621-3362 or (800) 462-7585 (TTY) from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week. Hurricane survivors are also encouraged to call the FEMA hotline to report their damage. Other resources may be found online at www.laseva.org.

Low-interest disaster loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) may be available for eligible applicants. The SBA helps businesses of all sizes (including landlords), private nonprofit organizations, homeowners, and renters fund repairs or rebuilding efforts and cover the cost of replacing lost or damaged personal property. Disaster loans cover losses not fully compensated by insurance or other recoveries.

For more information, individuals may contact SBA's Disaster Assistance Customer Service Center by calling (800) 659-2955, emailing disastercustomerservice@sba.gov, or visiting SBA's website at <https://disasterloan.sba.gov/ela>. Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals may call (800) 877-8339.

For more information on Virginia's recovery, visit the disaster Web page at <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4291>, Twitter at <https://twitter.com/FEMAreion3> and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management website, www.vaemergency.gov.

Beware of Fraud

Both FEMA and the Virginia Attorney General's Office are warning Virginia residents of the risk of fraud and common scams in the wake of the 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. Virginians are urged to ask questions, and to require identification when someone claims to represent a government agency.

Survivors 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 the Virginia Attorney General's Office Consumer Protection Hotline at (800) 552-9963.

Background

When the U.S. President declares a major disaster, FEMA, in cooperation with the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division, helps to establish 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 partners with state bar associations and other legal organizations to recruit volunteer lawyers in affected areas to handle survivors' cases. In Virginia, the partners utilize the hotline offered by the Virginia State Bar Young Lawyers Conference, which provides legal information and referrals for civil legal issues. Survivors 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). Such cases are referred to a local lawyer referral service. To determine whether an issue qualifies for free legal assistance, individuals should call (800) 310-7029 to determine whether a particular issue qualifies.

Partner Organizations

The following organizations have joined forces to establish a toll-free phone line for Virginia Hurricane Matthew victims to request free legal assistance, and to provide volunteer attorneys to handle cases arising from hurricane related damage.

Virginia State Bar Young Lawyers Conference – The Virginia State Bar Young Lawyers Conference is an unified organization of young lawyers dedicated to serving the public and the legal profession.

Legal Aid Society of Eastern Virginia – The Legal Aid Society of Eastern Virginia is a regional, non-profit law firm that provides free legal services in civil matters to low-income people in order to ensure access to justice and to remove legal barriers to economic opportunity.

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. Through an agreement with the American Bar Association, FEMA underwrites the cost of operating toll free legal assistance lines for survivors in areas designated as federal disaster sites.

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