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Lawyers help heroes write wills

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Armand Glick and his wife, Terry, worried that if they were to die or be injured, someone would need to take care of their children, ages 7 to 16. The parents also wanted to provide for them financially. But who? And how to ensure it?

The parents drew up simple documents on their home computer and crossed their fingers that they'd done everything correctly.

Brandon and Shantel Shearer, both 20-somethings, had not yet gotten past the talking-about-it stage, although they'd agreed on who they would ask to raise their 4- and 1-year-olds should they die unexpectedly.

On Friday, the two couples dotted all the i's and crossed all the t's and walked away smiling, their children's futures secure.

Glick, a captain with the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office, and Shearer, a Salt Lake City police officer, were among 200 first responders and spouses from Salt Lake City, Taylorsville and Salt Lake County agencies, along with the Utah Transit Authority, who formalized their final wishes as guests of the Utah Bar Association's Young Lawyers Division, which rounded up close to 100 volunteer lawyers and more than 60 notaries to complete the paperwork as part of the Wills for Heroes program.

And despite the spectre of death and injury that drove the project, it was a cheerful gathering at the UTA offices. Working in shifts, several dozen at a time, attorneys manned computers borrowed from the foundation and from the law firm Ballard Spahr, looking for technology glitches as notaries (who doubled as each other's witnesses) chatted between tasks.

Wills for Heroes was born in the rubble of the World Trade Center. When the dust settled after terrorist attacks in 2001, killing hundreds of emergency first responders, South Carolina attorney Anthony Hayes asked how he could help. It turned out very few of the first responders had done their "what-if" paperwork — the wills and other estate documents. He founded the program to help protect the protectors.

Randall Mansfield, a chaplain and officer for UTA, said he didn't have a will when he was shot 24 years ago on duty with another police force. "Although emergency responders are historically on the front line and subject to being seriously injured and killed, you don't like to think about that part happening. And it's expensive. So you cross your fingers and hope for the best. But every year, some are lost to accidents, assaults, etc."

Hayes and an Arizona attorney, Jeff Jacobson, created the Wills for Heroes Foundation, then enlisted members of state bar associations to prepare basic legal documents free for emergency medical, fire and law enforcement personnel and spouses. Utah is now one of about a dozen states whose lawyers have adopted the program, according to Stephanie Pugsley, this year's Young Lawyers Division president.

Even talking about the service, which unites occupations that are sometimes at odds with each other, is strangely emotional.

"It's a great program," said Ivins chief of police and public safety director Wade Carpenter, who participated at Utah's inaugural event in St. George last month during the Utah Bar Association meeting. "A lot of times we deal with attorneys on another level. This is something that gives us a unique tie-in to each other.

"I was a little skeptical. No way will they do wills for law enforcement for free. I was amazed. They donate their time, and it's a great asset for our officers and others."

The software to generate the documents is provided by LexisNexis, its HotDocs program so simple and intuitive that lawyers who normally have nothing to do with estate planning were preparing them just fine Friday. The volunteer attorneys printed the documents out on the spot (no personal information is kept in the computers), and the responders took them to volunteer notaries such as Sandy Burgess and Carolyn Updike, who both work for Questar.

Several first responders said they'd been putting off the task because of the cost and the amount of time they thought it would take. But a half-hour into the event, they'd gotten it down to less than the time it takes to do a load of laundry.

Young Lawyer co-chairwomen for the event, Emily Smith and Rachel Terry, said they'd actually had more volunteers than they could use. And they plan to do it again in July and September, most likely in the Provo and Logan areas. More information is available online at willsforheroes.org. Friday's Salt Lake event was the second largest for the Wills for Heroes program.

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