



CONTACTS

Francine Walker
The Florida Bar
(c) 850-321-7846
(o) 850-561-5666
(o) 850-561-5834
(o) 850-561-5762
fwalker@floridabar.org

Andrew VanSingel
DLS Director
American Bar Association
Young Lawyers Division
(c) 616.293.4729
vansingelDLS@gmail.com

Free Legal Assistance Available for Florida Hurricane Irma Survivors

September 13, 2017 -- A legal aid hotline is now available for Hurricane Irma survivors in Florida who cannot pay for an attorney: **1-866-550-2929**. The hotline operates through a partnership between The Florida Bar Young Lawyers Division, the American Bar Association (ABA) Young Lawyers Division, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Both English and Spanish voicemail recordings give instructions for callers to leave a message requesting storm-related legal assistance, and to provide their name, telephone number, county of residence, and a description of their legal problems.

Assistance through this hotline is available to qualified Floridians affected by Hurricane Irma in all Florida counties. Those who qualify will be matched with Florida lawyers who have volunteered to provide free legal help such as:

- Securing FEMA and other benefits
- Making life, medical and property insurance claims
- Dealing with home repair contractors
- Replacing wills and other important legal documents destroyed in the hurricane
- Helping with consumer protection matters, remedies and procedures
- Counseling on mortgage-foreclosure problems or landlord/tenant issues

Callers can leave a message on the hotline at any time. Calls will be returned within two business days between 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. There are some limitations: for example, assistance is not available for cases in which fees are paid as part of a settlement or award from a court. Such cases will be referred to a lawyer referral service. Funding for this hotline comes from FEMA under the authority of Section 415 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency assistance Act (Public Law 100-707).

Additional Resources for Floridians

Additional Florida Bar resources and information are listed at www.floridabar.org/hurricaneinfo and include:

Legal Assistance Consumer Guide – The Florida Bar’s “Mass Disaster” consumer guide provides information for consumers on whom to contact for legal assistance and how to protect their legal rights in the event of a mass disaster: [linked here](#) y en español [aquí](#).

Florida Free Legal Answers – Florida Free Legal Answers is an online advice clinic to match low-income Floridians with licensed attorneys who can answer basic legal questions at www.florida.freelegalanswers.org. A temporary increase of the qualifying cap has been lifted so that Floridians affected by Hurricane Irma can post questions and receive answers from attorney volunteers through this Florida Bar/ABA program.

Legal Aid Assistance – Resources and volunteer opportunities for legal aid and pro bono attorneys and information to help Floridians seeking civil legal aid are listed at <https://thefloridabarfoundation.org/storm-aid>. The Florida Bar Foundation created the Florida Hurricane Legal Aid Fund for civil legal assistance for Floridians affected by Hurricane Irma and any subsequent hurricanes that make landfall in Florida.

Unethical Conduct – Those who feel they have been unfairly treated by a lawyer should contact The Florida Bar’s Attorney Consumer Assistance Program (ACAP) at 1-866-352-0707. Only Florida Bar members who are eligible to practice can give legal advice and provide legal services. If Floridians are concerned about a non-lawyer or organization giving legal advice, these consumer pamphlets provide information on “Hiring The Right Person To Help Me With My Legal Problems” and “Filing An Unlicensed Practice of Law Complaint” y en español [aquí](#).

Price Gouging – Attorney General Pam Bondi activated Florida’s price gouging hotline for all consumers in Florida at 1-866-9-NO-SCAM (1-866-966-7226). Problems with insurance companies can be directed to the Attorney General’s office by calling 1-866-966-7226 or by calling the Florida Department of Financial Services at 1-800-342-2762.

Court Closures – The Florida Supreme Court webpage lists updates on all court closures and tolling orders.

Major Disaster Declaration

The full list of counties covered for FEMA Assistance to Individuals and Households (IA) is currently: Broward, Charlotte, Clay, Collier, Duval, Flagler, Hillsborough, Lee, Manatee, Miami-Dade, Monroe, Palm Beach, Pinellas, Putnam, Sarasota, St. Johns (additional counties may be added later). See announcements in the Federal Register:

<https://www.fema.gov/disaster/notices/amendment-no-1-8> and

<https://www.fema.gov/disaster/notices/amendment-no-2-3>.

People who have sustained property damage as a result of the severe storms and flooding 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. Flood survivors are also encouraged to call the FEMA hotline to report their damage. For more information on Florida’s recovery: <https://www.fema.gov/hurricane-irma>

Low-interest disaster loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) are available for eligible applicants. 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 disasterloan.sba.gov. Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals may call 800-877-8339.

For more information on Florida's recovery, visit the disaster Web page at <https://www.fema.gov/hurricane-irma> and on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/fema>.

Beware of Fraud

Both FEMA and the Florida Attorney General's Office are warning Florida 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. Floridians 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 Florida Attorney General's Office Consumer Protection Hotline at 866-966-7226.

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 Florida, the partners utilize the hotline offered by The Florida Bar and The Florida Bar Young Lawyers Division, 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. 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.

Partner Organizations

The following organizations have joined forces to establish a toll-free phone line for Florida hurricane and flood survivors to request free legal assistance, and to provide volunteer attorneys to handle cases arising from recent Hurricane Irma and the resulting flood damage.

Florida Bar Young Lawyers Division – The purpose of the Young Lawyers Division is to assist The Florida Bar in its purposes, to stimulate and encourage the interest and participation of YLD members in the programs of The Florida Bar, to provide a full and complete program of activities and projects designed to be of interest and assistance to YLD members, and to engage in such activities as shall tend to further the best interests of the legal profession. The section coordinates the activities of YLD members and to serve as a medium for fostering discussion and free interchange of ideas relative to the duties, responsibilities and problems of YLD members.

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 Lone Star Legal Aid, the American Bar Association, the Legal Services Corporation, the National Legal Aid and Defender Association, and Pro Bono Net.

Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida, Inc. – Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida (CLSMF) is the primary provider of free legal aid for low to moderate income residents in Central Florida. CLSMF has approximately 90 lawyers, advocates and support staff who work in 8 offices serving 12 counties in Central Florida: Brevard, Citrus, Flagler, Hernando, Lake, Marion, Orange, Osceola, Putnam, Seminole, Sumter and Volusia. Since 1966, CLSMF has provided legal assistance and advocacy to help the people of Central Florida obtain the basic necessities of life: food, shelter, health care, safety and education. The organization's mission is to increase access to justice and empower vulnerable communities through legal advocacy and education.

Florida Rural Legal Services, Inc. – Florida Rural Legal Services, Inc. is a private, non-profit corporation which provides free civil legal services to indigent families and low-income elderly people in thirteen counties of South Central Florida. FRLS also provides legal assistance to migrant workers throughout the state of Florida. FRLS has seven offices that serve Charlotte, DeSoto, Glades, Hardee, Hendry, Highlands, Indian River, Lee, Martin, Okeechobee, Palm Beach, Polk, and St. Lucie. Since 1966, they have been dedicated to providing quality legal advice, representation, and education for low income people and communities.

Legal Services of Greater Miami, Inc. – Legal Services of Greater Miami, Inc. is the largest provider of broad-based civil legal services for the poor in Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties, and is recognized in the state and in the nation as a model legal services program. Legal Services of Greater Miami is passionately committed to equal justice. Legal Services of Greater Miami provides clients with legal services in three languages from regional offices located in [Miami](#) and [South Dade](#), which also serves residents of [Monroe County](#).

Legal Services of North Florida, Inc. – Legal Services of North Florida, Inc. is a private, not-for-profit corporation that works to ensure low-income people have equal access to the courts. LSNF serves individuals and families in sixteen counties across the central and western panhandle, including Franklin, Jefferson, Leon, Wakulla, Okaloosa, Walton, Bay, Gulf, Holmes, Washington, Escambia, Santa Rosa, Calhoun, Gadsden, Jackson, and Liberty. Since 1976, LSNF has provided legal aid and advised low-income and elderly persons.

Bay Area Legal Services, Inc. – Bay Area Legal Services is a nonprofit, public interest law firm that provides civil legal assistance to low-income residents in the Tampa Bay region. BALS serves Hillsborough, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas, and Sarasota Counties. Over fifty years ago, Bay Area Legal Services first opened its doors to provide free civil legal services to low-income Tampa residents.

Three Rivers Legal Services, Inc. – Three Rivers Legal Services, Inc. is a private, non-profit corporation which provides free civil legal services to low-income, eligible clients in seventeen counties throughout North Florida. Three Rivers Legal Services has three offices that serve Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Clay, Columbia, Dixie, Duval, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Levy, Madison, Nassau, St. Johns, Suwannee, Taylor and Union Counties. Since 1978, they have been dedicated to the provision of quality legal assistance to the poor, abused, disabled and neglected, and to empowerment through preventive legal education.

Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida, Inc. – The mission of Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida is to improve the lives of low income persons in its community through advocacy, education, representation and empowerment. CCLA began providing legal services to the low income population of Broward County in January 2004, and serves Broward and Collier counties.

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