



Free Legal Assistance Available for Puerto Rico Disaster Survivors

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September 28, 2017 -- A disaster legal aid hotline is now available for hurricane survivors in Puerto Rico who cannot pay for an attorney: **1-800-310-7029**. The hotline operates through a partnership between Legal Services Corporation of Puerto Rico, the American Bar Association (ABA) Young Lawyers Division, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the Louisiana Civil Justice Center (LCJC).

The disaster legal aid hotline will operate through LCJC. Widespread infrastructure devastation in Puerto Rico made it necessary to host the hotline in the U.S. mainland. LCJC has a longstanding history providing disaster legal services information to callers.

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 Puerto Rican residents affected by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in the following municipalities:

Maria – All municipalities

Irma – Canovanas, Catano, Culebra, Dorado, Fajardo, Loiza, Luquillo, Toa Baja, Vega Baja, Vieques

Those who qualify will be matched with a pro bono attorney who has 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

The hours of the hotline are Monday through Friday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm local time. 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 consisting of regularly admitted members of the Puerto Rico Bar Association. 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).

Major Disaster Declaration

On September 5, 2017 the President issued a major disaster declaration for Puerto Rico due to the impact of Hurricane Irma (DR-4336) and again on September 20, 2017 for Hurricane Maria (DR-4339). For more information, please visit <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4336>, and <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4339>.

People who sustained property damage as a result of recent hurricanes 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 damages.

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/la. Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals may call 800-877-8339.

For more information on Puerto Rico's recovery, visit the disaster Web page at <https://www.fema.gov/disaster> or on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/femaregion2>.

Beware of Fraud

Both FEMA and the Government of Puerto Rico are warning Puerto Rico 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. Residents of Puerto Rico 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).

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).

Partner Organizations

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

Legal Services Corporation of Puerto Rico – The LSCPR is a non-profit that provides civil legal assistance for low-income, elderly, and disaster-affected residents of Puerto Rico through a toll-free hotline, court-based help desks, and community legal clinics.

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.

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: www.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.

Puerto Rican Bar Association, Inc. – The PRBA (available at: <http://prbany.com/>) was founded in 1957. It is one of the oldest minority bar associations in New York State with members of all backgrounds. Its purpose is to offer both personal and professional support to Puerto Rican and Latino attorneys and address the concerns of a rapidly growing Latino community. The PRBA represents the interests of attorneys, judges, law professors, and students of Latino descent who share a common interest in fostering professional development in the legal community and addressing issues that are important not only to the Puerto Rican community but the Latino community as a whole.