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'Heroes' get help with wills

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ST. GEORGE — Police officers and firefighters face death all the time, yet for many of them wills and estate planning are the last thing they want to think about. But without a will, the state decides where a person's assets go and who will receive them.

"I don't think they (first responders) like to think about a will because it reminds them that their lives are on the line all the time. It's important though, especially for first responders, because they take on a greater risk than most people," said St. George attorney Daniel Rogers.

Volunteers from the Utah Bar Association spent the afternoon Friday working with local first responders and their spouses to help them write their wills.

St. George police officer Tyrell Bangerter, the administrative assistant to Chief Marlon Stratton, helped coordinate the event that brought out more than 30 first responders and their spouses.

For many of these couples, this is the first time they had thought about getting a will. For others, \$500 to \$1,500 was cost-prohibitive.

"This is an awesome program," Bangerter said. "I've been married for two years and I've thought about doing a will but it was more money than I could spend at the time. This way we get the service for free with no strings attached. The fact is we could be gone any moment, no one knows, and now my estate is at least taken care of if that does happen. All I have to do is amend it when we have children."

The event, which was part of the nationwide program Wills for Heroes, was brought to southern Utah by the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division and the Wills for Heroes Foundation. A nationwide program, Wills for Heroes was started by attorney Anthony Hayes after 9/11 when he learned that most of the first responders who had lost their lives that day did not leave behind wills to provide for their loved ones.

"Having worked with spouses who have lost their loved ones in the line of duty, I know it's already a very stressful time. Having a will available simplifies things a lot and then at least they don't have to worry about that part of it in the midst of everything else they're dealing with," said Jan Blaswer-Upchurch, Mountain Region trustee for Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS.)

Hayes founded the program in 2001 as a way to help out and volunteer his services. At that time, services were available in seven states. Later he expanded it into a nonprofit organization that provides free wills and estate planning throughout the country.

"A lot of people wanted to know how they could help after 9/11. Anthony saw a way he could help and he did it," said Jeffery Jacobson, an Arizona attorney and co-founder of the Wills for Heroes Foundation.

The foundation works with affiliate organizations all over the country to help provide free wills and other estate-planning documents to first responders, including police officers, firefighters, paramedics, corrections and probation officers.

A Web site, www.willsforheroes.org, has information on other programs the Wills for Heroes Foundation offers.

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