

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division
The Affiliate

DLS Helps Flood Victims in Georgia

By Jill M. Kastner

In late September, heavy rains swept through several counties in Georgia causing significant flooding. Hundreds of homes were damaged. To help victims of this disaster, a Disaster Legal Services (DLS) Hotline was set up.

"Thankfully, Georgia had a disaster plan in place," said Tyronia M. Morrison, the ABA YLD District Representative for Georgia and Alabama. The Young Lawyers Division (YLD) for the State Bar of Georgia maintains a hotline number throughout the year. The hotline number is activated once FEMA authorizes the ABA YLD to provide disaster legal services. After the disaster hit, staff members at the State Bar of Georgia were ready to help.

"People within the bar actually started contacting me before I got the green light to set up the hotline," said Tyronia. "There were a few kinks along the way, but everyone pulled together to make sure the victims received the legal services they so desperately needed."

The hotline has a voice mail, which is checked frequently by State Bar of Georgia staff. The staff member then sends a detailed e-mail to the Georgia YLD Disaster Legal Services Chair outlining each message and providing contact information for the caller. Within forty-eight hours, the DLS Chair or the ABA YLD District Representative (when needed) makes initial contact with the victim to obtain any additional information for referral or to answer questions. If a referral is necessary, the DLS Chair assigns the matter to one of its attorney volunteers.

The hotline was deactivated on October 20, 2009. About 70 calls were received for the life of the disaster. "Historically, the Georgia YLD has only received about five-to-six calls during a disaster," said Tyronia, whose two-year term as an ABA YLD District Representative began a little more than a month before her first disaster.

"During that time, I reviewed the disaster plans for Alabama and Georgia and initiated contact with the officers of the young lawyer groups for the State Bar of Alabama and the State Bar of Georgia." Tyronia is glad she took those steps. She advises other District Representatives and bar leaders to familiarize themselves with the disaster system that their state has in place. "If no system has been established, get to work building a network of volunteers," said Tyronia. Otherwise, "when the disaster hits, you will wish you had."

The DLS program is a federal disaster legal assistance program operated by the ABA YLD under a memorandum of understanding with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a division of the Department of Homeland Security.

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