

Providing Disaster Legal Assistance: Lessons Learned

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Brief Description:

The Legal Aid Society of San Diego, Inc., along with other non-profits and law firms helped to set up free legal clinics for those victims affected by the Southern California Fires of October/November 2003. These clinics were run in conjunction with the FEMA sites managed by the Federal Government, providing victims with a wide variety of social and legal resources. These legal clinics, located at FEMA sites, were set up within 48 hours of the start of the fires and were staffed by Legal Aid staff and volunteer attorneys from the San Diego County Bar Association. These clinics provided immediate brief consults with the victims relating to their specific legal issues that arose because of the fires. Upon completion of the brief consultation, the client was referred to a private bar attorney with more experience in the type of law requested for further representation if needed.

Topical Outline:

- I. Mobilization of legal community
 - a. Bar meeting
 - b. Meeting of executives from legal services providers
 - c. Utilization of forms/documents from 9/11 disaster and Florida Hurricanes

- II. Disaster Legal Services Hotline
 - a. County Bar assistance
 - b. Individuals helping with the hotline
 - c. Training booklet created by County Bar for those assisting with hotline

- III. Involvement of non-profits
 - a. San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program and Legal Aid Society of San Diego, Inc.
 - b. Roles of organizations in getting legal community involved

- IV. Free Legal Clinics for victims
 - a. Clinics offered by FEMA
 - b. Partnership with FEMA for running legal clinics
 - c. Scheduling private bar attorneys
 - d. Legal documents required at clinics
 - e. Less scrutiny on income guidelines
 - f. Experts on-site for legal advice
 - g. Legal forms and referral procedures

- V. Private attorney involvement
 - a. Helping Handbook by Morrison & Foerster
 - b. Ongoing, individual case representation
 - c. Assistance with County Bar phone lines
 - d. Assistance at legal clinics

- VI. Lessons learned
 - a. Utilize Private Attorneys immediate willingness to help immediately
 - b. Diversity of attorneys needed for on-site legal clinics
 - c. Effectiveness of having legal clinics at FEMA sites
 - i. More hands-on assistance
 - ii. Immediate answers to fears and concerns by clients
 - iii. Clients may not know immediately what their future legal issues are, but feel better knowing assistance available

- VII. Importance of holistic advocacy
 - a. Effectiveness of social programs all at one site, including legal, IRS, welfare, DMV
 - b. Social work aspect to the on-site provision of legal services