

Helping in Hurricane's Aftermath Brings Home Value of Lawyers

By Blake F. Megdal

There is a view that the practice of law has little to offer society and that lawyers often hinder the practical resolution of human problems. As a first-year attorney, I have learned that this is simply not the case: Through power, influence and knowledge of procedure and process, lawyers are often in the best position to change lives positively. Still, I did not fully understand the impact attorneys can have until I traveled recently to Biloxi, Miss., to participate in pro bono legal clinics that provide assistance to victims of Hurricane Katrina. The three-day experience dramatically changed my perspective on my life as a lawyer, citizen and human being.

Working at a firm that views community involvement and contribution as a core responsibility of good lawyering, I received encouragement and support in making the trip to Biloxi. The Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project organized the effort. During my stint, nine attorneys visited the Gulf Coast region, including a fellow first-year associate at Latham & Watkins and representatives of other national and local Southeast firms. Our mission was to provide a range of legal advice to local residents, including assistance with insurance issues, landlord-tenant disputes and Federal Emergency Management Agency appeals.

As we flew into Gulfport Airport, we could see the devastation wrought by Katrina, which almost a year after the hurricane is still widespread and largely unaddressed. The entire coastline is devastated,

and many parts of Biloxi are still uninhabitable. A bird's-eye view, however, could not prepare us for the reality on the ground, where the situation was even more dire. As with all disasters, nothing is orderly, and needs outstrip resources. Yet we forged ahead and addressed various issues, most involving attempts to evict tenants from FEMA trailers that have been set up to provide shelter to hurricane victims. One disabled woman was due for eviction the next day, with nowhere else to turn for shelter. After gathering and organizing the necessary documentation, we persuaded FEMA to approve a handicap trailer for her — an accomplishment for which she was immensely grateful.

Merely identifying ourselves as lawyers often allowed for progress in dealing with FEMA and various insurance companies. In one instance, we convinced an insurance company to reassess a victim's home, even though our client had made the same request to the same insurance agent six months prior. In many instances, the hurricane victims were simply unaware that they qualified for a particular grant or, even worse, didn't know how to apply. Where clients had exhausted all federal or state aid, the fact that we were there and listening seemed at least to boost morale. One client remarked, "A year after and all the way from California, there is still hope for us."

We were less successful in addressing other cases, in part due to significant bureaucratic challenges and the lack of a foundation on which to start over. For example, we met with city officials who could not secure federal relief grants because they did not have the necessary



paperwork to prove property ownership as required by FEMA and other agencies. The papers had been lost or destroyed in the hurricane, and local governments had never stored the documents electronically.

I learned that, in the face of such complex circumstances, there is no such thing as a small victory. We made progress wherever possible and provided comfort as an alternative, but I could not help wondering how much more we could have accomplished had we stayed longer or come with more than nine attorneys. For a country of unrivaled wealth and compassion, we cannot forget that the hurricane victims continue to face daily struggles to survive bleak economic realities.

Lawyers can be of extraordinary help in navigating complex bureaucratic procedures and keeping insurance companies and property owners honest. As a profession, there is more we can do.

Ultimately, I left Mississippi with conflicting feelings of hope and helplessness. I wish I could have done more for the people I met, but I was encouraged by their character and resiliency. Beyond any measure of help I provided, I also left with a greater sense of my obligations as a lawyer and a citizen.

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