

U.S.

# In Harvey Aftermath, Lawyers Mobilize to Help Houston Victims

Legal-aid groups and law firms volunteer to aid with insurance and FEMA claims, among other things



Evacuees at the George R. Brown Convention Center in downtown Houston on Thursday. PHOTO: CARLOS BARRIA/REUTERS

*By Nicole Hong and Sara Randazzo*

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Attorney Sandra Brown sat at a United Way in Houston for hours on Thursday, fielding questions about insurance claims and disaster-relief scams. She tried keeping her mind off the fact that an explosion caused a fire in her office building, rendering it unusable, and her own home suffered more than 5 feet of flooding.

“I’m getting very little sleep,” Ms. Brown said. “But this is a long-haul project. You need lawyers at every step of the way.”

Ms. Brown, the disaster-relief manager for Lone Star Legal Aid, a group that provides legal counsel to low-income individuals, is among the hundreds of lawyers who have mobilized to help victims of Hurricane Harvey.

If past hurricanes are any guide, those affected will likely face legal issues for years after the storm.

The legal work is already beginning. Lawyers say evacuees at shelters have been asking for help applying for Federal Emergency Management Agency funds for temporary housing, accessing Social Security checks and food stamps, and recovering important paperwork lost in the flood.

Lawyers on site have been able to “answer questions people didn’t even know they had,” said Keri Brown, a partner at Baker Botts LLP in Houston. “They haven’t had a chance to think they might need a new birth certificate.”

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Flood victims are asking whether they have to keep paying rent for damaged properties, while those facing pre-existing criminal or immigration issues have been concerned about missing court dates, lawyers said.

Because of flooding at courthouses across southern Texas, court dates will be postponed. The federal

courthouse in Houston, which suffered limited flooding, is reopening Tuesday, but courthouses in Victoria and Galveston likely had more damage, according to Lee Rosenthal, the chief federal judge in the Southern District of Texas.

A steady rotation of lawyers from legal-aid organizations and major law firms has staffed shifts at shelters, said Ellyn Josef, pro bono counsel at law firm Vinson & Elkins LLP.

Back in her office at the Houston-based international firm, Ms. Josef has been consumed for two days with a more mundane task: making photo copies. She and some helpers made 26,000 copies of fliers on Wednesday and Thursday offering advice on topics ranging from filing insurance claims to how to get children back in school.

“People are just crying at the tables, out of appreciation and frustration,” she said of the scene at shelters.

Michelle Fisher, 33 years old, came to the shelter at the George R. Brown Convention Center downtown Friday to speak to legal-aid attorneys about obtaining housing vouchers. The attorneys gave her a packet of information informing her of her rights as a renter. After the first floor of her apartment building flooded, Ms. Fisher didn’t know where she was going to stay the night.

“I feel embarrassed,” said Ms. Fisher, an unemployed home-health aide, with tears in her eyes. “I feel discouraged. I feel overwhelmed.”

An immediate priority for legal-aid groups is to warn evacuees about disaster-related scams, including price-gouging, identity theft and fraudulent submissions of FEMA or insurance claims. On Thursday, the Justice Department announced the formation of a working group focused on investigating such illegal activity after Harvey.

At least 1,600 lawyers nationally have volunteered to help through a survey form provided by the State Bar of Texas, according to a spokeswoman there. The state bar is contacting each volunteer and matching their skill sets with legal agencies around Texas.

Out-of-state lawyers will be able to help, too, thanks to a recent order from the state’s highest court allowing lawyers who aren’t bar-certified in Texas to temporarily practice law there if they’re assisting Harvey victims.

Legal groups say they are seeking lawyers with a wide range of expertise, including in bankruptcy, flood insurance and home foreclosures.

Some legal issues arising from the storm may be less obvious. For instance, parents with custody arrangements may have disputes if one parent gets relocated far away from the child, requiring a family law expert, said legal-aid groups.

Post-disaster litigation can stretch for years, and it’s not uncommon for recovery efforts to take a decade. Tracy Figueroa, an attorney based in Corpus Christi, said a lawsuit she filed against FEMA involving home-repair assistance for victims of 2008’s Hurricane Dolly was pending for nine years.

Ms. Figueroa, the disaster assistance team manager at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, will be focused on appealing FEMA claim denials and helping evacuees with getting housing repairs or new housing.

For now, she said, lawyers can help simply by going with charged laptops to shelters, where many evacuees are without internet access and have been unable to file FEMA claims online.

“There’s nothing that’s been on this scale,” said Ms. Figueroa, who has assisted low-income individuals through 15 federally declared disasters. “We know this is going to be a challenge.”

—*Joseph De Avila contributed to this article.*

### **Corrections & Amplifications**

Saundra Brown and Tracy Figueroa are attorneys with legal-aid organizations in Texas, and

several legal organizations are helping victims of Hurricane Harvey. An earlier version of this story incorrectly referred to Ms. Brown and Ms. Figueroa as pro bono attorneys and to the groups assisting victims as pro bono organizations. (Sept. 7)

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